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THE
PICTURE OF ST. JOHN.

BY
BAYARD TAYLOR.



BOSTON:
TICKNOR AND FIELDS.
1866.

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

IN regard to the subject of this poem I have nothing to say. It grew naturally out of certain developments in my own mind; and the story, unsuggested by any legend or detached incident whatever, shaped itself to suit the theme. The work of time, written only as its own necessity prompted, and finished with the care and conscience which such a venture demands, I surrender it to the judgment of the reader.

The form of the stanza which I have adopted, however, requires a word of explanation. I have endeavored to strike a middle course between the almost inevitable monotony of an unvarying stanza, in a poem of this length, and the loose char-

acter which the heroic measure assumes when arbitrarily rhymed, without the check of regularly recurring divisions. It seemed to me that this object might be best accomplished by adhering rigidly to the measure and limit of the stanza, yet allowing myself freedom of rhyme within that limit. The *ottava rima* is undoubtedly better adapted for the purposes of a romantic epic than either the Spenserian stanza or the heroic couplet; but it needs the element of humor (as in Byron's "Don Juan") to relieve its uniform sweetness. On the other hand, the proper compactness and strength of rhythm can with difficulty be preserved in a poem where all form of stanza is discarded. My aim has been, as far as possible, to combine the advantages and lessen the objections of both.

I know of but one instance in which the experiment has been even partially tried, — the "Oberon" of Wieland, wherein the rhymes are wilfully varied, and sometimes the measure, the

stanza almost invariably closing with an Alexandrine. In the present case, I have been unable to detect any prohibitory rule in the genius of our language; and the only doubt which suggested itself to my mind was that the ear, becoming swiftly accustomed to the arrangement of rhyme in one stanza, might expect to find it reproduced in the next. I believe, however, that such disappointment, if it should now and then occur, will be very transitory,—that even an unusually delicate ear will soon adjust itself to the changing order, and find that the varied harmony at which I have aimed (imperfectly as I may have succeeded) compensates for the lack of regularity. At times, I confess, the temptation to close with an Alexandrine was very great; but it was necessary to balance the one apparent license by a rigid adherence to the customary form in all other respects. Hence, also, I have endeavored, as frequently as possible, to use but three rhymes in a stanza, in order to

strengthen my experiment with an increased effect of melody. I have found, since the completion of the poem, that it contains more than seventy variations in the order of rhyme, not all of which, of course, can be pronounced equally agreeable: nor does this freedom involve less labor than a single form of stanza, because the variations must be so arranged as to relieve and support each other. My object has been, not to escape the laws which Poetry imposes, but to select a form which gives greater appearance of unrestrained movement, and more readily reflects the varying moods of the poem.

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P R O E M .



T O T H E A R T I S T S .

I.

BECAUSE no other dream my childhood knew
Than your bright Goddess sends,—that earliest
Her face I saw, and from her bounteous breast,
All others dry, the earliest nurture drew ;
And since the hope, so lovely, was not true,
To write my life in colors,—win a place
Among your ranks, though humble, yet with grace
That might accord me brotherhood with you:

II.

Because the dream, thus cherished, gave my life
Its first faint sense of beauty, and became,
Even when the growing years to other strife
Led forth my feet, a shy, secluded flame :
And ye received me, when our pathways met,
As one long parted, but of kindred fate ;
And in one heaven our kindred stars are set :
To you, my Brethren, this be dedicate !

III.

And though some sportive nymph the channel turned,
And led to other fields mine infant rill,
The sense of fancied destination still
Leaps in its waves, and will not be unlearned.
I charge not Fate with having done me wrong ;
Much hath she granted, though so much was spurned ;
But leave the keys of Color, silent long,
And pour my being through the stops of Song !

IV.

Even as one breath the organ-pipe compels
To yield that note which through the minster swells
In chorded thunder, and the hollow lyre
Beneath its gentler touches to awake
The airy monotones that fan desire,
And thrills the life with blood of battle, — so
Our natures from one source their music take,
And side by side to one far Beauty flow!

V.

And I have measured, in fraternal pride,
Your reverence, your faith, your patient power
Of stern self-abnegation; and have tried
The range between your brightest, darkest hour,
The path of chill neglect, and that so fair
With praise upspringing like a wind-sown flower:
But, whether thorns or amaranths ye wear,
Your speech is mine, your sacrifice, your prayer!

VI.

Permit me, therefore, ye who nearest stand,
Among the worthiest, and kindest known
In contact of our lives, to take the hand
Whose grasp assures me I am not alone;
For thus companioned, I shall find the tone
Of flowing song, and all my breath command.
Your names I veil from those who should not see;
Not from yourselves, my Friends, and not from me!

VII.

You, underneath whose brush the autumn day
Draws near the sunset which it never finds,—
Whose art the smoke of Indian-Summer binds
Beyond the west-wind's power to breathe away:
Who fix the breakers in their lifted grace
And stretch the sea-horizon, dim and gray,
I'll call you OPAL,—so your tints enchase
The pearly atmospheres wherein they play.

VIII.

And you, who love the brown October field,
The lingering leaves that flutter as they cling,
And each forlorn but ever-lovely thing, —
To whom elegiac Autumn hath revealed
Her sweetest dirges, BLOODSTONE: for the hue
Of sombre meadows to your palette cleaves,
And lowering skies, with sunlight breaking through,
And flecks of crimson on the scattered leaves!

IX.

You, TOPAZ, clasp the full-blown opulence
Of Summer: many a misty mountain-range
Or smoky valley, specked with warrior-tents,
Basks on your canvas: then, with grander change,
We climb to where your mountain twilight gleams
In spectral pomp, or nurse the easeful sense
Which through your Golden Day forever dreams
By lakes, and sunny hills, and falling streams.

X.

You banish color from your cheerful cell,
O PAROS! but a stern imperial form
Stands in the marble moonlight where you dwell,
A Poet's head, with grand Ionian beard,
And Phidian dreams, that shine against the storm
Of toilful life, the white robe o'er them cast
Of breathless Beauty: yours the art, endeared
To men and gods, first born, enduring last.

XI.

You, too, whom how to name I may not guess,
Except the jacinth and the ruby, blent,
The native warmth of life might represent,
Which, drawn from barns and homesteads, you express,
Or vintage revels, round the maple-tree;
Or when the dusky race you quaintly dress
In art that gives them finer liberty,—
Made by your pencil, ere by battle, free!

XII.

Where'er my feet have strayed, whatever shore
 I visit, there your venturous footprints cling.
 From Chimborazo unto Labrador
 One sweeps the Continent with eagle wing,
 To dip his brush in tropic noon, or fires
 Of Arctic night: one sets his seal upon
 Far Colorado's cleft, colossal spires,
 And lone, snow-kindled cones of Oregon.

XIII.

Another* through the mystic moonlight floats
 That silvers Venice; and another sees
 The blazoned galleys and the gilded boats
 Bring home her Doges: Andalusian leas,
 Gray olive-slopes, and mountains sun-embrowned
 Entice another, and from ruder ground
 Of old Westphalian homes another brings
 Enchanted memories of the meanest things.

XIV.

To each and all, the hand of fellowship!
A poet's homage (should that title fall
From other lips than mine) to each and all!
For, whether this pale star of Song shall dip
To swift forgetfulness, or burn beside
Accepted lamps of Art's high festival,
Its flame was kindled at our shrines allied,
In double faith, and from a twofold call!

THE
PICTURE OF ST. JOHN.



BOOK I.

THE
PICTURE OF ST. JOHN.



BOOK I.

THE ARTIST.

I.

C O M P L E T E the altar stands: my task is done.
Awhile from sacred toil and silent prayer

I rest, and never shone the vale so fair

As now, beneath the mellow autumn sun,

And overbreathed by tinted autumn air!

In drowsy murmurs slide the mountain rills,

And, save of light, the whole wide heaven is bare

Above the happy slumber of the hills.

II.

Here, as a traveller whose feet have clomb
A weary mountain-slope, may choose his seat,
And resting, track the ways that he hath come, —
The broken landscapes, level far below,
The turf that kissed, the flints that tore his feet,
And each dim speck that once was bliss or woe, —
I breathe a space, between two sundered lives,
And view what now is ended, what survives.

III.

For, truly, he that reverently holds
The wonder of his being, bowed in awe
Of what divine or dread himself infolds,
And boundless liberty and sternest law
Commingled, he alone is counted worth
The veil from Life's dim countenance to draw, —
To face the solemn facts of Death and Birth,
And break his path across the wilds of Earth!

IV.

Such as I am, I am: in soul and sense
Distinct, existing in my separate right,
And though a Power, beyond my clouded sight,
Spun from a thousand gathered filaments
My cord of life, within its inmost core
That life is mine: its torture, its delight,
Repeat not those that ever were before
Or ever shall be: mine are Day and Night.

V.

God gives to most an order which supplies
Their passive substance, and they move therein.
To some He grants the beating wings that rise
In endless aspiration, till they win
An awful vision of a deeper sin
And loftier virtue, other earth and skies:
And those their common help from each may draw,
But these must perish, save they find the law.



VI.

Vain to evade and useless to bewail
My fortune! One among the scattered few
Am I: by sharper lightning, sweeter dew
Refreshed or blasted,—on a wilder gale
Caught up and whirled aloft, till, hither borne,
My story pauses. Ere I drop the veil
Once let me take the Past in calm review,
Then eastward turn, and front the riper morn.

VII.

What sire begat me and what mother nursed,
What hills the blue frontiers of Earth I thought,
Or how my young ambition scaled them first,
It matters not: but I was finely wrought
Beyond their elements from whom I came.
A nimbler life informed mine infant frame:
The gauzy wings some Psyche-fancy taught
To flutter, soulless custom could not tame.

VIII.

Our state was humble, — yet above the dust,
If deep below the stars, — the state that feeds
Impatience, hinting yet denying needs,
And thus, on one side ever forward thrust
And on the other cruelly repressed,
My nature grew, — a wild-flower in the weeds, —
And hurt by ignorant love, that fain had blessed,
I sought some other bliss wherein to rest.

IX.

(And, wandering forth, a child that could not know
The thing for which he pined, in sombre woods
And echo-haunted mountain-solitudes
I learned a rapture from the blended show
Of form and color, felt the soul that broods
In lonely scenes, the moods that come and go
O'er wayward Nature, making her the haunt
Of Art's forerunner, Love's eternal want.

X.

Long ere the growing instinct reached my hand,
It filled my brain : a pang of joy was born,
When, soft as dew, across the dewy land
Of Summer, leaned the crystal-hearted Morn ;
And when the lessening day shone yellow-cold
On fallow glebe and stubble, I would stand
And feel a dumb despair its wings unfold,
And wring my hands, and weep as one forlorn.

XI.

Ah, formless need, uncomprehended pain
Of childhood ! Wings that beat and bleed in vain,
Not knowing yet the highways of the air !
What laggard years, before my life could guess
How to expend its burning eagerness
For voice or deed ! The sense that fed my prayer
Grew into knowledge, as it outward sent
Its force, and made my hand its instrument.

XII.

At first in play, but soon with heat and stir
Of joy that hails discovered power, I tried
To mimic form, and taught mine eye to guide
The unskilled fingers. Praise became a spur
To overtake success, for in that vale
The simple people's wonder did not fail,
Nor vulgar prophecies, which yet confer
The first delicious thrills of faith and pride.

XIII.

The path once found, my flexile nature took
Such aid and guidance as around me lay,
And hurrying onward, as an upland brook
That shifts and whirls by grassy cape and bay,
Once gained an outlet to the falling dells,
Leaps into flashing purpose, leapt away
My heart through gracious dreams and lovely spells,
Its goal detected, bright with distant day!

XIV.

So, as on shining pinions lifted o'er
The perilous bridge of boyhood, I advanced.
In warmer air the misty Mænads danced,
And Sirens sang on many a rising shore,
And Glory's handmaids beckoned me to choose
The freshest of the unworn wreaths they bore;
So gracious Fortune showed, so fair the hues
Wherewith she paints her cloud-built avenues!

XV.

How rosed with morn, how angel-innocent,
Thus looking back, I see my lightsome youth!
Each thought a wondrous bounty Heaven had lent,
And each illusion was a radiant truth!
Each sorrow dead bequeathed a young desire,
Each hovering doubt or cloud of discontent
So interfused with Faith's pervading fire,
That to achieve seemed light as to aspire!

XVI.

Ere up through all this airy ecstasy
The clamorous pulses of the senses beat,
And half the twofold man, maturing first,
Usurped its share of life, and bade me see
The ways of pleasure opening for my feet,
I stood alone : the tender breast that nursed,
The loins from whence I sprang, alike were cold,
And mine the humble roof, the scanty gold.

XVII.

And I was free ; though sad, cast forth adrift,
Not unconsoled : the art my soul embraced
With undivided love had power to lift
The loneliness of grief. Through many a rift
New lights of hope the sudden sorrow chased,
And from my own rekindled dreams I drew
Courage to claim and patience to pursue
Success, whose brimming cup I burned to taste !

XVIII.

The pale, cold azure of my mountain sky
Became a darkness : Arber's head unshorn
No temple crowned,—not here could fame be born ;
And, nor with gold nor knowledge weighted, I
Set forth, and o'er the green Bavarian land,
A happy wanderer, fared : the hour was nigh
When, in the home of Art, my feet should stand
Where Time and Power have kissed the Painter's hand !

XIX.

O, sweet it was, when, from that bleak abode
Where avalanches grind the pines to dust,
And crouching glaciers down the hollows thrust
Their glittering claws, I took the sunward road,
Making my guide the torrent, that before
My steps ran shouting, giddy with its joy,
And tossed its white hands like a gamesome boy,
And sprayed its rainbow frolics o'er and o'er !

XX.

Full-orbed, in rosy dusk, the perfect moon
That evening shone: the torrent's noise, afar,
No longer menaced, but with mellow tune
Sang to the twinkle of a silver star,
Above the opening valley. "Italy!"
The moon, the star, the torrent, said to me,—
"Sleep thou in peace, the morning will unbar
These Alpine gates, and give thy world to thee!"

XXI.

And morning did unfold the jutting capes
Of chestnut-wooded hills, that held embayed
Warm coves of fruit, the pine's Æolian shade,
Or pillared bowers, blue with suspended grapes;—
A land whose forms some livelier grace betrayed;
Where motion sang and cheerful color laughed,
And only gloomed, amid the dancing shapes
Of vine and bough, the pointed cypress-shaft!

XXII.

On, — on, through broadening vale and brightening sun
I walked, and hoary in their old repose
The olives twinkled : many a terrace rose,
With marbles crowned and jasmine overrun,
And orchards where the ivory silk-worm spun.
On leafy palms outspread, its pulpy fruit
The fig-tree held ; and last, the charm to close,
A dark-eyed shepherd piped a reedy flute.

XXIII.

My heart beat loud : I walked as in a dream
Where simplest actions, touched with marvel, seem
Enchanted yet familiar : for I knew
The orchards, terraces, and breathing flowers,
The tree from Adam's garden, and the blue
Sweet sky behind the light aerial towers ;
And that young faun that piped, had piped before, —
I knew my home : the exile now was o'er !

XXIV.

And when the third rich day declined his lids,
I floated where the emerald waters fold
Gem-gardens, fairy island-pyramids,
Whereon the orange hangs his globes of gold,—
Which aloes crown with white, colossal plume,
Above the beds where lavish Nature bids
Her sylphs of odor endless revel hold,
Her zones of flowers in balmy congress bloom!

XXV.

I hailed them all, and hailed beyond, the plain;
The palace-fronts, on distant hills uplift,
White as the morning-star; the streams that drift
In sandy channels to the Adrian main:
Till one rich eve, with duplicated stain
Of crimson sky and wave, disclosed to me
The domes of Venice, anchored on the sea,
Far-off,—an airy city of the brain!

XXVI.

Forth from the shores of Earth we seemed to float,
Drawn by that vision,—hardly felt the breeze
That left one glassy ripple from the boat
To break the smoothness of the silken seas;
And far and near, as from the lucent air,
Came vesper chimes and wave-born melodies.
So might one die, if Death his soul could bear
So gently, Heaven before him float so fair!

XXVII.

This was the gate to Artists' Fairyland.
The palpitating waters kissed the shores,
Gurgled in sparkling coils beneath the oars,
And lapped the marble stairs on either hand,
Summoning Beauty to her holiday;
While noiseless gondolas at palace-doors
Waited, and over all, in charmed delay,
San Marco's moon gazed from her golden stand!

XXVIII.

A silent city! where no clattering wheels
 Jar the white pavement: cool the streets, and dumb,
 Save for a million whispering waves, which come
 To light their mellow darkness: where the peals
 Of Trade's harsh clarions never vex the ear,
 But the wide blue above, the green below,
 Her pure Palladian palaces insphere,—
 Piles, on whose steps the grass shall never grow!

XXIX.

There found I rest, and there the world I sought,—
 Eternal beauty and eternal joy,
 The flower of life, the bright result of thought,
 The perfect Art, which nothing can destroy;
 For, once embodied, its creation caught
 The right to be: and I, with pulses warm,
 Took to my brain each grand and lovely form,
 To build myself from what the Masters wrought.

XXX.

I sat within the courts of Veronese
And saw his figures breathe luxurious air,
And felt the sunshine of their lustrous hair :
Beneath the shade of Titian's awful trees
I stood, and watched the Martyr's brow grow cold :
Then came Giorgione, with his brush of gold,
To paint the dames that make his memory fair,—
The happy dames that never shall be old !

XXXI.

But most I lingered in that matchless hall
Where soars Madonna with adoring arms
Outspread, while deepening glories round her fall,
And every feature of her mortal charms
Becomes immortal, at the Father's call :
Beneath her, silver-shining cherubs fold
The clouds that bear her, slowly heavenward rolled :
The Sacred Mystery broodeth over all !

XXXII.

And still, as one asleep, I turned away
To see the crimson of her mantle burn
In sunset clouds, the pearly deeps of day
Filled with cherubic faces,—ah, to spurn
My hopeless charts of pictures yet to be,
And feed the fancies of a swift despair,
Which mocked me from the azure arch of air,
And from the twinkling beryl of the sea!

XXXIII.

If this bright bloom were inaccessible
Which clad the world, and thus my senses stung,
How could I catch the mingled tints that clung
To cheek and throat, and softly downward fell
In poise of shoulders and the breathing swell
Of woman's bosom? How the life in eyes,
The glory on the loosened hair that lies,
The nameless music o'er her being flung?

XXXIV.

Or how create anew the sterner grace
In man's heroic muscles sheathed or shown,
Whether he stoops from the immortal zone
Bare and majestic, god in limbs and face ;
Or lies, a faun, beside his mountain flock ;
Or clasps, a satyr, nymphs among the vine ;
Or kneels, a hermit, in his cell of rock ;
Or sees, a saint, his palms of glory shine !

XXXV.

I took a fisher from the Lido's strand,
A youthful shape, by toil and vice unworn,
Upon his limbs a golden flush like morn,
And on his mellow cheek the roses tanned
Of health and joy. Perchance the soul I missed,
From mine exalted fancy might be born :
With eye upraised and locks by sunshine kissed,
I painted him as the Evangelist.

XXXVI.

In vain!—the severance of his lips expressed
Kisses of love whereon his fancy fed,
And the warm tints each other sweetly wed
In slender limb and balanced arch of breast,
So keen with life, so marked in every line
With unideal nature, none had guessed
The dream that cheered me and the faith that led;
But human all I would have made divine!

XXXVII.

I found a girl before San Marco's shrine
Kneeling in gilded gloom: her tawny hair
Rippled across voluptuous shoulders bare,
And something in the altar-taper's shine
Sparkled like falling tears. This girl shall be
My sorrowing Magdalen, as guilty-sweet,
I said, as when, pure Christ! she knelt to thee,
And laid her blushing forehead on thy feet!

XXXVIII.

She sat before me. Like a sunny brook
Poured the unbraided ripples softly round
The balmy dells, but left one snowy mound
Bare in its beauty: then I met her look,—
The conquering gaze of those bold eyes, which made,
Ah, God! the unrepented sin more fair
Than Magdalen kneeling with her humbled hair,
Or Agatha beneath the quæstor's blade!

XXXIX.

What if my chaste ambition wavered then?
What if the veil from mine own nature fell
And I obeyed the old Circean spell,
And lived for living, not for painted men?
Youth follows Life, as bees the honey-bell,
And nightingales the northward march of Spring,
And once, a dazzled moth, must try his wing,
Though but to scorch it in the blaze of Hell!

XL.

Why only mimic what I might possess?
The cheated sense that revels in delight
Mocked at my long denial: touch and sight,
The warmth of wine, the sensuous loveliness
Of offered lips and bosoms breaking through
The parted bodice: winds whose faint caress
And wandering hands the daintiest dreams renew:
The sea's absorbing and embracing blue:

XL.

Of these are woven our being's outward veil
Of rich sensation, which has power to part
The pure, untroubled soul and drunken heart,—
A screen of gossamer, but giants fail
The bright, enchanted web to rend in twain.
Two spirits dwell in us: one chaste and pale,
A still recluse, whose garments know no stain,
Whose patient lips are closed upon her pain:

XLII.

The other bounding to her cymbal's clang,
A bold Bacchante, panting with the race
Of joy, the triumph and the swift embrace,
And gathering in one cup the grapes that hang
From every vine of Youth : around her head
The royal roses bare their hearts of red ;
Music is on her lips, and from her face
Fierce freedom shines and wild, alluring grace !

XLIII.

Who shall declare that ever side by side
To weave harmonious fate these spirits wrought ?
To whom came ever one's diviner pride
And one's full measure of delight, unsought ?
Who dares the cells of blood enrich, exhaust,
Or trust his fortune unto either guide ? —
So interbalanced hangs the equal cost
Of what is ordered and of what is taught !

XLIV.

Surprised to Passion, my awakened life
Whirled onward in a warm, delirious maze,
At first reluctant, and with pangs of strife
That dashed their bitter o'er my honeyed days,
Until my soul's affrighted nun withdrew
And left me free : for light that other's chains
As garlands seemed, and fresh her wine as dew,
And wide her robes to hide the banquet-stains!

XLV.

Those were the days of Summer which intrude
Their sultry fervor on the realm of Spring,
And push its buds to sudden blossoming ;
When earth and air, with panting love imbued,
O'erpower the subject life, and ceaseless dart
All round the warm horizon of the heart
Heat-lightnings in the sky of youth, which first
Regains its freshness when the bolts have burst.

XLVI.

And thus, when that Sirocco's breath had passed,
A refluent wind of health swept o'er my brain,
Cold, swift, and searching; and before it fast
Fled the uncertain, misty shapes which cast
Their glory on my dreams. The ardor vain
That would have snatched, unearned, slow labor's crown,
Was dimmed; and half with courage, half with pain,
I guessed the path that led to old renown.

XLVII.

I turned my pictures, pitying the while
My boyish folly, for I could not yet
The dear deception of my youth forget,
And though it parted from me like an isle
Of the blue sea behind some rushing keel,
Still from the cliffs its temple seemed to smile,
Fairer in fading: future morns reveal
No bowers so bright as yesterdays conceal.

XLVIII.

Dried was the dew and fled the golden cloud !
O'er the bare earth the sharp, unsparing sun
Shone, disenchanting, chasing every one
The sweet illusions from their secret shroud
Of silence and of shadow : and I drew
The simple forms which wooed not, but compelled,
Because my drugged ambition, roused anew,
Mine idle powers unto its service held.

XLIX.

The laughing boys that on the marble piers
Lounge with their dangling feet above the wave ;
The tawny faces of the gondoliers ;
The low-browed girl, whose scarce-unfolded years
But half the lightning of her glances gave ; —
I sketched in turn, with busy hand and brave,
And crushed my clouded hope's recurring pang,
And sweet "*Ti voglio bene assai*" sang.

L.

Then came the hour when I must say farewell
To silent Venice in her crystal nest, —
When with the last peals of San Marco's bell
Her hushed and splendid pageant closed, and fell
Like her own jewel in the ocean's breast.
Belfry, and dome, and the superb array
Of wave-born temples floated far away,
And the dull shores received me in the west.

LI.

And past the Euganean hills, that break
The Adrian plain, I wandered to the Po,
And saw Ferrara, vacant in her woe,
Clasp the dim cell wherein her children take
A ghastly pride from her immortal shame;
And hailed Bologna, for Caracci's sake, —
The master bold, who scorned to court his fame,
But bared his arm and dipped his brush in flame.

LII.

Through many a dark-red dell of Apennine
With chestnut-shadows in its brookless bed,
By flinty slopes whose only dew is wine,
And hills the olives gave a hoary head,
I climbed to seek the sunny vale where flows
The Tuscan river, — where, when Art was dead,
Lorenzo's spring thawed out the ages' snows,
And green with life the eternal plant arose!

LIII.

At last, from Pratolino's sloping crest,
I saw the far, aerial, purple gleam,
As from Earth's edge a fairer orb might seem
In softer air and sunnier beauty drest,
And onward swift with panting bosom pressed,
Like one whose wavering will pursues a dream
And shrinks from waking; but the vision grew
With every step distinct in form and hue:

LIV.

Till, on the brink of ancient Fiesolé,
Mute, breathless, hanging o'er the dazzling deeps
Of broad Val d'Arno, which the sinking day
Drowned in an airy bath of rosy ray,—
An atmosphere more dream-imbued than Sleep's, —
My feet were stayed; with sweet and sudden tears,
And startled lifting of the cloud that lay
Upon the landscape of the future years!

LV.

I stood and gazed; and silvery bells below
Throbbled, like the beating pulses of the scene,
From distant domes that burned athwart the screen
Of liquid color. Songs of self-born flow,
Like air or water, mingled near and far,
Half heard: I felt around my forehead blow
The breath of hopes that form nor language know, —
Soft murmurs, voices from another star!

LVI.

I leaned against a cypress-bole, afraid
With blind foretaste of coming ecstasy,
So rarely on the soul the joy to be
Prophetic dawns, so frequent falls the shade
Of near misfortune! All my senses sang,
And lark-like soared and jubilant and free
The flock of dreams, that from my bosom sprang,
O'er yonder towers to hover and to hang!

LVII.

Ah, lovely Florence! Never city wore
So shining robes as I on thee bestowed:
For all the rapture of my being flowed
Around thy beauty, filling, flooding o'er
The banks of Arno and the circling hills
With light no wind of sunset ever spills
From out its saffron seas! Once, and no more,
Life's voyage touches the enchanted shore.



LVIII.

Then, as the dusty road I downward paced,
A phantom arch was ever builded nigh
To span my coming, luminous and high;
And airy columns, crowned with censers, graced
The dreamful pomp, — with many a starry bell
From garlands woven in the fading sky,
And noiseless fountains shimmered, as they fell,
Like meteor-fires that haunt a fairy dell!

LIX.

Two maids, upon a terrace that o'erhung
The highway, lightly strove in laughing play
Each one the other's wreath to snatch away,
With backward-bending heads, and arms that clung
In intertwining beauty. Both were young,
And one as my Madonna-dream was fair;
And she the garland from the other's hair
Caught with a cunning hand, and poised, and flung.

LX.

A fragrant ring of jasmine flowers, it sped,
Dropping their elfin trumpets in its flight,
And downward circling, on my startled head
Some angel bade the diadem alight!
The cool green leaves and breathing blossoms white
Embraced my brow with dainty, mute caress:
I stood in rapt amazement, soul and sight
Surrendered to that vision's loveliness.

LXI.

She, too, stood, smitten with the wondrous chance
Whereby the freak of her unwitting hand
A stranger's forehead crowned. I saw her stand,
Most like some flying Hour, that, in her dance
Perceives a god, and drops her courser's rein:
Then, while I drank the fulness of her glance,
Crept over throat and cheek a bashful stain,—
She fled, yet flying turned, and looked again.

LXII.

And I went forward, consecrated, blest,
And garlanded like some returning Faun
From Pan's green revels in the woodland's breast.
Here was a crown to give Ambition rest,
A wreath for infant Love to slumber on!
And blended, both in mine enchantment shone,
Till Love was only Fame familiar grown,
And Fame but Love triumphantly expressed!

LXIII.

Such moments come to all whom Art elects
To serve her, — Poet, Painter, Sculptor, feel,
Once in their lives the shadows which conceal
Achievement lifted, and the world's neglects
Are spurned behind them, like the idle dust
Whirled from Hyperion's golden chariot-wheel:
Once vexing doubt is dumb, and long disgust
Allayed, and Time and Fate and Fame are just!

LXIV.

It is enough, if underneath our rags
A single hour the monarch's purple shows.
In dearth of praise no true ambition flags,
And by his self-belief the student knows
The master: nor was ever wholly dark
The Artist's life. Though timid fortune lags
Behind his hope, there comes a day to mark
The late renown that round his name shall close.

LXV.

I dared not question my prophetic pride,
But entered Florence as a conqueror,
To whom should ope the Tribune's sacred door,
Hearing his step afar. On every side
Great works fed faith in greatness that endured
Irrecognition, patient to abide
Neglect that stung, temptations that allured, —
Supremely proud and in itself secured!

LXVI.

From the warm bodies Titian loved to paint,
Where life still palpitates in languid glow;
From Raphael's heads of Virgin and of Saint,
Bright with divinest message; from the slow
And patient grandeur Leonardo wrought;
From soft, effeminate Carlo Dolce, faint
With vapid sweetness, to the Titan thought
That shaped the dreams of Michel Angelo:

LXVII.

From each and all, through varied speech, I drew
One sole, immortal revelation. They
No longer mocked me with the hopeless view
Of power that with them died, but gave anew
The hope of power that cannot pass away
While Beauty lives: the passion of the brain
Demands possession, nor shall yearn in vain:
Its nymph, though coy, did never yet betray.

LXVIII.

It is not much to earn the windy praise
That fans our early promise: every child
Wears childhood's grace: in unbelieving days
One spark of earnest faith left undefiled
Will burn and brighten like the lamps of old,
And men cry out in haste: "Behold, a star!"
Deeming some glow-worm light, that soon is cold,
The radiant god's approaching avatar!

LXIX.

So I was hailed: and something fawn-like, shy,
Caught from the loneliness of mountain-glens,
That clung around me, drew the stranger's eye
And held my life apart from other men's.
Their prophecies were sweet, and if they breathed
But ignorant hope and shallow pleasure, I
No less from them already saw bequeathed
The crown by avaricious Glory wreathed.

LXX.

And, climbing up to San Miniato's height,
Among the cypresses I made a nest
For wandering fancy : down the shimmering west
The Arno slid in creeping coils of light :
O'er Boboli's fan-like pines the city lay
In tints that freshly blossomed on the sight,
Enringed with olive orchards, thin and gray,
Like moonlight falling in the lap of day.

LXXI.

There sprang, before me, Giotto's ivory tower ;
There hung, a planet, Brunelleschi's dome :
Of living dreams Val d' Arno seemed the home,
From far Careggi's dim-seen laurel bower
To Bellosguardo, smiling o'er the vale ;
And pomp and beauty and supremest power,
Blending and brightening in their bridal hour,
Made even the blue of Tuscan summers pale !

LXXII.

Immortal Masters! Ye who drank this air
And made it spirit, as the must makes wine,
Be ye the intercessors of my prayer,
Pure Saints of Art, around her holy shrine!
The purpose of your lives bestow on mine, —
The child-like heart, the true, laborious hand
And pious vision, — that my soul may dare
One day to climb the summits where ye stand!

LXXIII.

Say, shall my memory walk in yonder street
Beside your own, ye ever-living shades?
Shall pilgrims come, gray men and pensive maids,
To pluck this moss because it knew my feet,
And forms of mine move o'er the poet's mind
In thoughts that still to haunting music beat,
And Love and Grief and Adoration find
Their speech in pictures I shall leave behind?

LXXIV.

Ah ! they, the Masters, toiled where I but dreamed !
The crown was ready ere they dared to claim
One leaf of honor : then, around them gleamed
No Past, where rival souls of splendid name
At once inspire and bring despair of fame.
A naked heaven was o'er them, where to set
Their kindled stars ; and thus the palest yet
Exalted burns o'er all that later came.

LXXV.

They unto me were gods : for, though I felt
That nobler 't was, creating, even to fail
Than grandly imitate, my spirit knelt,
Unquestioning, to their authority.
I learned their lives, intent to find a tale
Resembling mine, and deemed my vision free
When most their names obscured with flattering veil
That light of Art which first arose in me.

LXXVI.

And less for Beauty's single sake inspired
Than old interpretations to attain,
I sought with restless hand and heated brain
Their truth to reach, — by his example fired
Who sketched his mountain-goats on rock or sand,
And his, the wondrous boy, beneath whose hand,
Conferring sanctity with sweet disdain,
A cask became a shrine, a hut a fane.

LXXVII.

My studio was the street, the market-place:
I snared the golden spirit of the sun
Amid his noonday freedom, — swiftly won
The unconscious gift from many a passing face, —
The spoils of color caught from dazzling things,
From unsuspecting forms the sudden grace,
Alive with hope to find the hidden wings
Of the Divine that from the Human springs.

LXXVIII.

Ere long, my canvas glowed with riper tints :
The bloom of life was there, if immature
The early fruitage. Nature ever prints
Her own bright seal on that which we allure
From her unguarded keeping, dropping hints
Whereby we track her labyrinthine ways
Back to some splendid secret, that repays
Life sacrificed with life that shall endure.

LXXIX.

A jasmine garland hung above my bed,
Withered and dry : beneath, a picture hung, —
A shadowy likeness of the maid who flung
That crown of welcome. On my sleeping head
The glory of the vanished sunset fell,
And still the leaves reviving fragrance shed,
And dreams crept out of every jasmine-bell,
Inebriate with their fairy hydromel.

LXXX.

Where was my lost Armida? She had grown
A phantom shape, a star of dreams, alone ;
And I no longer dared to touch the dim
Unfinished features, lest my brush should mar
A memory swift as wings of cherubim
That unto saints in prayer may flash afar
Up the long steep of rifted cloudy walls,
Wherethrough the overpowering glory falls.

LXXXI.

But, as the Rose will lend its excellence
To the unlovely earth in which it grows,
Until the sweet earth says, "I serve the Rose,"
So, penetrant with her was every sense.
She filled me as the moon a sleeping sea,
That shows the night her orb reflected thence,
Yet deems itself all darkness : silently
The dream of her betrayed itself in me.

LXXXII.

I had a cherished canvas, whereupon
An antique form of inspiration grew
To other life : beneath a sky of blue,
Filled with the sun and limpid yet with dawn,
A palm-tree rose : its glittering leaves were bowed
As though to let no ray of sunlight through
Their folded shade, and kept the early dew
On all the flowers within its hovering cloud.

LXXXIII.

Madonna's girlish form, arrested there
With poising foot, and parted lips, and eyes
With innocent wonder bright and glad surprise,
And hands half-clasped in rapture or in prayer,
Met the Announcing Angel. On her sight
He burst in splendor from the sunny air,
Making it dim around his perfect light,
And in his hand the lily-stem he bare.

LXXXIV.

Naught else, save, nestling near the Virgin's feet,
A single lamb that wandered from its flock,
And one white dove, upon a splintered rock
Above the yawning valleys, dim with heat.
Beyond, the rifted hills of Gilead flung
Their phantom shadows on the burning veil,
And, far away, one solitary, pale
Vermilion cloud above the Desert hung.

LXXXV.

I painted her, a budding, spotless maid,
That has not dreamed of man,—for God's high choice
Too humble, yet too pure to be afraid,
And from the music of the Angel's voice
And from the lily's breathing heart of gold
Inspired to feel the mystic beauty laid
Upon her life : the secret is untold,
Unconsciously the message is obeyed.

LXXXVI.

How much I failed, myself alone could know ;
How much achieved, the world. My picture took
Its place with others in the public show,
And many passed, and some remained to look,
While I, in flushed expectancy and fear,
Stood by to watch the gazers come and go,
To note each pausing face, perchance to hear
A careless whisper tell me Fame was near.

LXXXVII.

“’Tis Ghirlandajo’s echo !” some would say ;
And others, “ Here one sees a pupil’s hand ” :
“ An innovation, crude, but fairly planned,”
Remarked the connoisseur, and moved away,
Sublimely grave : but one, sometimes, would stand
Silent, with brightening face. No more than this,
Though voiceless praise, ambition could demand,
And for an hour I felt the Artist’s bliss.

LXXXVIII.

One day, a man of haughty port drew nigh, —
A man beyond his prime, but still unbent,
Though the first flakes of age already lent
Their softness to his brow : his wandering eye
Allowed its stately patronage to glide
Along the pictures, till, with gaze intent
He fixed on mine, and startled wonderment
Displaced his air of cold, indifferent pride.

LXXXIX.

“Signor Marchese!” cried, approaching, one
Who seemed a courtly comrade, “can it be
That in these daubs the touch of Art you see, —
These foreign moons that ape our native sun?”
To whom he said : “the Virgin, Count! ’Tis she,
My Clelia! like a portrait just begun,
Where the design is yet but half avowed,
And shimmers on you through a misty cloud:

XC.

“So, here, I find her. ’Tis a marvellous chance.
Your painters choose some peasant beauty’s face
For their Madonnas, striving to enhance
By softer tints her coarse plebeian grace
To something heavenly. Here, the features wear
A noble stamp: who painted this, is fit
That Clelia’s self beside his canvas sit, —
His hand, methinks, might fix her shadow there.”

XCI.

“’Tis true, — you wed her then, as I have heard,
And to the young Colonna?” “Even so:
We made the family compact long ago.
A wilful blade, they say, but every bird
Is wiser when he owns a nested mate;
And I shall lose her ere the winter’s snow
Falls on the Apennine, — a father’s fate!
But from these two my house again may grow.

XCII.

“She lost, her picture in the lonely hall
Shall speak, from silent lips, her sweet ‘good-night!’
And soothe my childless fancy. I’ll invite
This painter to the work: his brush has all
The graces of a hand which takes delight
In noble forms, — and thus may best recall,
Though nameless he, what Palma’s brush divine
Found in the beauteous mothers of her line!”

XCIII.

I heard; but trembling, turned away to hide
An ecstasy no longer to be quelled, —
The lover’s longing and the artist’s pride:
For, though the growing truth of life dispelled
My rash ideal, my very blood had caught
The fine infection: from my heart it welled,
Colored each feeling, perfumed every thought,
And gave desire what hope had left unsought!

XCIV.

'T was blind, unthinking rapture. Who was she,
Pandolfo's daughter, young Colonna's bride,
The pampered maiden of a house of pride,
That I, though but in thought, should bend the knee
Before her beauty? She was set too high,
And her white lustre wore patrician stains,
Like sunshine falling through heraldic panes
That rise between the altar and the sky.

XCV.

Next day the Marquis came. With antique air
Of nicest courtesy, his words did sue
The while his tone commanded: could I spare
Some hours? — a portrait only, it was true,
But the Great Masters painted portraits too,
Even Raffaëlo: at his palace, then!
The Lady Clelia would await me there:
His thanks, — to-morrow, should it be? — at ten.

XCVI.

But when the hour approached, and o'er me hung
The shadow of the high Palladian walls,
My heart beat fast in feverish intervals :
I half drew back : the lackeys open flung
The brazen portals, — broad before me rose
The marble stairs, — above them gleamed the halls,
And I ascended, as a man who goes
To see some unknown gate of life unclose.

XCVII.

They bore my easel to a spacious room
Whose northern windows curbed the eager day,
But under them a sunny garden lay :
A fountain sprang : the myrtles were in bloom,
And I remembered, — “ ere the winter's snow
Cloaks Apennine ” Colonna bears away
Her who shall wear them. 'Tis a woman's doom,
I laughed, — she seeks no other : let her go !

XCVIII.

Lo! rustling forward with a silken sound,
Her living self advanced! — as fair and frail
As May's first lily in a Northern vale,
As light in airy grace, as when she crowned
Her painter's head, — the Genius of my Fame!
Ah, words are vain where Music's tongue would fail,
And Color's brightest miracles be found
Imperfect, cold, to match her as she came!

XCIX.

The blood that gathered, stifling, at my heart,
Surged back again, and burned on cheek and brow.
“Your model!” smiled the Marquis; “you’ll avow
That she is not unworthy of your art.
I see you note the likeness, — it is strange:
But since you dreamed her face so nearly, now
You’ll paint it, — as she is, — I want no change”:
Then left, with wave of hand and stately bow.

C.

A girlish wonder dawned in Clelia's face.
 Her frank, pure glances seemed to question mine,
 Or scanned my features, seeking to retrace
 Her way to me along some gossamer line
 Of memory, almost found, then lost again.
 Meanwhile, I set my canvas in its place,
 Recalled the artist-nature, though with pain,
 And tamed to work the tumult of my brain.

CI.

"I give you trouble," then she gently said.
 My brow was damp, my hand unsteady. "Nay,"
 I answered; "'t is the grateful price I pay
 For that fair wreath you cast upon my head."
 She started, blushing: all at once she found
 The shining clew,—her silvery laughter made
 The prelude to her words: "the flowers will fade,
 But by your hand am I forever crowned!"

THE
PICTURE OF ST. JOHN.



BOOK II.

BOOK II.



THE WOMAN.

I.

O GIVE not Beauty to an artist's eye
And deem his heart, untroubled, can withstand
Her necromancy, changing earth and sky
To one wide net wherein her captives lie!—
Nor, since his mind the measure takes, his hand
Essays the semblance of each hue and line,
That cold his pulses beat, as if he scanned
Her marble death and not her life divine!

II.

How could I view the sombre-shining hair
Without the tingling, passionate wish to feel
Its silken smoothness? How the golden-pale
Pure oval of the face, the forehead fair,
The light of eyes whose dusky depths conceal
Love's yet unkindled torch, and wear the mail
Of cruel Art, that bade me mimic bliss
And only paint the mouth I burned to kiss?

III.

Those perfect lips, their virgin dew undrained,
Smiled, as the parted lips of Morning smile,
Brightening the world; or cast, when sadness reigned,
A shade like twilight o'er a lonely isle
That sleeps afar on some enchanted wave:
And as an unknown blossom might enslave
A wandering bee, and chain his wings awhile,
They held my heart, and all its hope, enchained.

IV.

So near, the airy wave her voice set free
Smote warm against my cheek! So near, I heard
The folds that hid her bosom, as they stirred
Above the heart-beat measuring now, for me,
Life's only music! Ah, so near, and yet
Between us rose a wall I could not see,
To dash me back, — before the wings that fret
For love's release, a crystal barrier set!

V.

But o'er mute lips the yearning eye may speak
In unforbidden glances, each a prayer,
Until their silent-woven web shall snare
The innocent fancy: so, to Clelia's cheek,
Long ere she dreamed, the unsuspected rose
Branched from her heart and spread its petals there,
Faint, tender, shadowy, as the flower that grows
Beneath the wildwood's roof in sunless air.

VI.

I kissed, in thought, each clear, delicious tint
That lured my mocking hand : my passion flung
Its lurking sweetness over every print
Of the soft brush that to her beauty clung,
And fondled while it toiled, — and day by day
The canvas brightened with her brightening face :
The artist gloried in the picture's grace,
But, ah ! the lover's chances lapsed away.

VII.

And now, — the last ! The grapes already wore
Victorious purple, ere their trodden death ;
The olives darkened through their branches hoar,
And from below the tubero's breath
Died round the casement, from the spicy shore
Of ripened summer, passionate as the sigh
I stifled : and my heart said, — “ speak or die !
The moment's fate stands fixed forevermore.”

VIII.

The naked glare of breezeless afternoon
Dazzled without : the garden swooned in heat.
The old duenna drooped her head, and soon
Behind the curtain slumbered in her seat.
Within my breast the crowded, panting beat
Disturbed my hand : the pencil fell : I turned,
And with imploring eyes and tears that burned
Sank in despairing silence at her feet.

IX.

I did not dare look up, but knelt, as waits
A foiled tyrannicide the headsman's blow :
At first a frightened hush, — the stealthy, slow,
Soft rustle of her dress, — a step like Fate's
To crown or smite : but now descended, where
Her garland fell, her hand upon my hair,
And, light as floating leaf of orchard-snow
Loosed by the pulse of Spring, it trembled there.

X.

Then I looked up, — O, grace of God ! to feel
Her answering tears like dew upon my brow ;
To touch and kiss her blessing hand ; to seal
Without a word the one eternal vow
Of man and woman, when their lives unite
Thenceforth forever, soul and body shared,
Like those the Grecian goddess, pitying, paired
To form the young, divine Hermaphrodite.

XI.

I breathed “you do not love Colonna?” “No,”
She whispered, “aid me, I am yours to save!”
“I yours to help, your lover and your slave, —
My soul, my blood is yours,” I murmured low.
The old duenna stirred : “when ? where ? one hour
For your commands !” As hurriedly she gave
Reply : “The garden, — yonder darkest bower,
When midnight tolls from Santa Croce’s tower !”

XII.

Ere the immortal light had time to fade
In either's eyes, the old Marchese came.
I veiled, in toil, the flush that still betrayed,
And Clelia, strong to hide her maiden shame,
The motion of her father's hand obeyed
And left us. Gravely he my work surveyed:
" 'Tis done, I think, — 't is she, indeed," he said:
" 'T was time," he muttered, as he turned his head.

XIII.

I bowed in silence, took his offered gold,
And down the marble stairs, through doors that cried,
On scornful hinges, of their owner's pride,
Passed on my way: my happy heart did fold
Pandolfo's treasure in its secret hold,
And every bell that chimed the feeble day
Down to its crimson burial, seemed to say:
"Not yet, not yet, for Love our tongues have tolled!"

XIV.

O sluggish bells, that lengthened so the hours,
With sun and stars conspiring to prolong
Day, sunset, twilight, — silent in your towers
While my heart ached to hear your drowsy song
Proclaim the bliss it could not yet believe!
“ Arise, O moon, and light the expectant bowers,”
I cried: “ ye stars, your branching garlands weave,
Till midnight’s glory dims the rose of eve !”

XV.

More slowly rolled the silver disk above
The hiding hills, than ever moon came up :
The sky’s begemmed and sapphire-tinted cup
Spilled o’er its dew, and Heaven in nuptial love
Stretched forth his mystic arms, and couched beside
The yearning Earth, his dusky-featured bride :
The pulses of the Night began to move,
And Life’s eternal secret ruled the tide.

XVI.

Along the shadow of the garden-walls
I crept: the streets were still, or only beat
To wavering echoes by unsteady feet
Of wine-flushed revellers from banquet halls.
They saw me not: the yielding door I gained,
And glided down a darksome alley, sweet
With slumbering roses, to the shy retreat
Of bashful bliss and yearning unprofaned.

XVII.

I stood in soft, enchanted gloom: around
The guarding branches bent, and drops of light
That shone like glow-worms on the mossy ground
Leaked through the roof: the fountain's babbling sound,
Near and incessant, seemed a friendly sprite,
To hide Love's whispers with melodious din.
I cleft the leaves and softly stole within,
Endymion-like, to wait my Queen of Night.

XVIII.

The amorous odors of the moveless air, —
Jasmine and tuberose and gillyflower,
Carnation, heliotrope, and purpling shower
Of Persian roses, — kissed my senses there
To keenest passion, clad my limbs with power
Like some young god's, when at the banquet first
He drinks fresh deity with eager thirst, —
And midnight rang from Santa Croce's tower!

XIX.

She came! a stealthy, startled, milk-white fawn,
Thridding the tangled bloom: a balmy wave
Foreran her coming, and the blushful dawn
Of Love its color to the moonlight gave,
And Night grew splendid. In a trance divine,
Hand locked in hand, with kissing pulse, we clung,
Then heart to heart; and all her being flung
Its sweetness to the lips, and mixed with mine.

XX.

Immortal Hour, whose starry torch did guide
Eternal Love to his embalmèd nest
In virgin bosoms, — Hour, supremely blest
Beyond thy sisters, lift thy brow in pride,
And say to her whose muffled beams invest
The bed where Strength lies down at Beauty's side,
“Before my holier lamp thy forehead hide :
Give up thy crown : the joy I bring is best !”

XXI.

As parted souls might meet in Heaven, we met,
With wonder seated by the side of bliss,
And rapture interblended with regret,
As each beholds in each the beauty set
Which, humble-hearted, in themselves they miss ;
And Love, intent to recognize his claim,
Made pure as dew the sweet, infectious kiss,
And tamed to tenderness his pulse of flame.

XXII.

“O saved, not lost, — Madonna, bless thy child!”
She murmured then; and I as fondly, “Death
Come now, and close my over-happy breath
On sacred lips, that shall not be defiled
By grosser kisses!” “Fail me not,” she said,
And clung the closer, — “God is overhead,
And hears you.” “Yea,” I whispered wild,
“And may His thunder strike the false one dead!”

XXIII.

No thought had she of lineage or of place :
Love washed the colors from her blazoned shield
To make a mirror for her lover's face,
Unto patrician ignorance revealed
The bliss to give, the ecstasy to yield,
And now, descended from her stately dream,
She trod the happy level of her race,
In perfect, sweet surrender, faith supreme.

XXIV.

With cautious feet, in dewy sandals shod,
And sidelong look, the perfumed Hours went by;
Until the azure darkness of the sky
Withered aloft, and shameless Morning trod
Her clashing bells. Our paradise was past,
And yet to part was bitterer than to die.
We rose: we turned: we held each other fast,
Each kiss the fonder as it seemed the last.

XXV.

O happy Earth! To Love's triumphant heart
Thou still art convoyed by the singing stars
That hailed thy birth: Heaven's beauteous counterpart,
No shadow dims thee, no convulsion mars
Thy fair green bosom: on thy forehead shine
The golden lilies of the bridegroom Day,
Thy hoary forests take the bloom of May,
Thy seas the sparkle of the autumn's wine!

XXVI.

Serenely beautiful, the brightening morn
Led on the march of mine enchanted round
Of days, wherein the world was freshly born,
And men with primal purity recrowned :
So deep my drunkenness of heart and brain,
That Art, o'ershadowed, sat as if forlorn
In Love's excess of glory, and in vain
Essayed my old allegiance to regain.

XXVII.

She to the regions o'er our lives unfurled
Is turned : from that which never is, she draws
Her best achievements and her finest laws,
And more enriches than she owes, the world, —
Whence, leading Life, she rules ; till Life, in turn,
Feels in its veins the warmer ether burn,
Asserts itself, and bids its service pause,
To *be* the beauty it was vowed to earn !

XXVIII.

And my transfigured heart no baby-love,
With dimpled face, had taken to its nest,
But that Titanic, pre-Olympian guest,
The elder god, who bears his slaves above
The fret of Time, the frowns of Circumstance ;
And, twin with Will, engendered in my breast
A certain vision of a life in rest,
And love secured against the shocks of chance.

XXIX.

It was enough to feel his potent arm
Lift me aloft, like giant Christopher,
Above the flood. Could he the dragon charm
Whose fanged and gilded strength still guarded her ?
The crumbling pride of twice three hundred years,
Trembling in dotage at the ghost of harm,
Could he subdue ? Ah, wherefore summon fears
To vex the faith that never reappears !

XXX.

But she the more, whose swift-approaching fate
Shamed the exulting bliss that made me free,
And clouded hers, thereon did meditate.

When next she met me at the garden-gate,
Its chilling shadow fell upon me. "See!"
She said, and dangled in the balmy dark
(The moon was down) a chain of jewelry,
That, snake-like, burned with many a diamond spark.

XXXI.

"His bridal gift!" she whispered: "he will come,
Ere long, to claim me. Speech, and tears, and prayer,
Are vain my father's will to overbear,
And better were it, had my lips been dumb.
Incredulous, he heard with wondering stare
My pleading: 'keep me, father, at your side!
I will not be that wanton prince's bride, —
Unwed, your lonely palace let me share!'

XXXII.

“Much more I said, not daring to reveal
Our secret; but, alas! I spoke in vain.
He coldly smiled and raised me: ‘do not kneel, —
’Tis useless: here’s a pretty, childish rain
For nothing, but the sun will shine anon.
What ails the girl? the compact shall remain.
Pandolfo’s name is not so newly won,
That we can smutch it and not feel the stain.’

XXXIII.

“He spoke my doom; but death were sweeter now,
Since, O my best-belovèd, life alone
Is where your eyes, your lips, can meet my own,
And Heaven commands, that registered your vow,
To save me, and fulfil it!” Then, around
My neck her white, imploring arms were thrown;
Her heart beat in mine ears with plaintive sound,
So close and piteously she held me bound.



XXXIV.

Ah me! 't was needless further to rehearse
The old romance, that life has ne'er belied,
The old offence which Love repeats to pride, —
The strife, the supplication, and the curse
Hung like a thunder-cloud above the dawn,
To threat the day: it better seemed, to fly
Beyond the circle of that sullen sky,
And storms let idly loose when we were gone.

XXXV.

“Darling,” I answered, staking all my fate
On the sole chance within my beggared hands, —
“Darling, the wealth of love is my estate,
Save one poor home, that in a valley stands,
Cool, dark, and lonesome, far beyond the line
Of wintry peaks that guard the summer lands;
But shelter safe, though paler suns may shine,
And Paradise, when once 't is yours and mine!

XXXVI.

“See! I am all I give: I cannot ask
That you should leave the laurel and the rose,
And halls of yellowing marble, meant to bask
In endless sun, and airs of old repose
That fan the beauteous ages, elsewhere lost, —
To see the world put on its deathly mask
Of low, gray sky and ever-deepening snows,
And dip its bowers in darkness and in frost.”

XXXVII.

“Nay, let” (she cried) “his mellow marbles shine
In Roman noons, — his fountains flap the airs,
And rank and splendor crowd his gilded stairs,
Wait in his halls, or drink his banquet-wine, —
So ne’er the hateful pomp I spurn be mine;
But take me, love! for ah, the father, too,
Who for his early claims my later cares,
Is leagued with him, — and I am left to you!”

XXXVIII.

“So, then, shall Summer cross the Alpine chain
And scare the autumn crocus from the meads;
And the wan naiads, 'mid their brittle reeds,
Feel the chill wave its languid pulse regain,
Wooing the azure brook-flowers into bloom
To greet your coming; and the golden rain
Of beechen forests shall your path illumine,
Till the Year's bonfire burn away its gloom!”

XXXIX.

Thus, at her words, my sudden rapture threw
Its glory on the scene so bleak before,
As to the nightly mariner a shore
That out of hollow darkness slowly grew,
Seeming huge cliffs that menaced with the roar
Of hungry surf, when Morning lifts her torch
Flashes at once to gardens dim with dew,
And homes and temples fair with pillared porch.

XL.

We only felt, that Love with his free hand
Should clasp his own : whatever lay beyond
Of usage broken, gulfs of fate o'erspanned
By hearts all-daring to assert their bond,
Of laws contemned, or foresight cast aside,
He was our Providence by sea or land
Thenceforth, — our sole protector, stay, and guide
In the new life and in the world untried.

XLI.

“Away!” was his command, and we obeyed;
And Chance assisted, ere three times the sun
Looked o'er the planet's verge, that swiftly spun
To bring the hour, so perilously delayed
My fortune with Colonna's now was weighed;
But that brief time of love's last liberty —
Pandolfo called to Rome, ere aught betrayed
His daughter's secret — turned the scale to me.

XLII.

My mules were waiting by the city gate,
With Gianni, quick to lead a lover's fate
Along the bridle-paths of Apennine, —
A gallant contadino, whom I knew
From crown to sole, each joint and clear-drawn line
Of plaited muscle, healthy, firm, and true;
And midnight struck, as from the garden came
She who forsook for me her home and name.

XLIII.

With them she laid aside her silken shell
And jewel-sparks, and chains of moony pearl, —
Bright, babbling toys, that of her rank might tell, —
And wore, to cheat the drowsy sentinel,
The scarlet bodice of a peasant-girl,
Her wealth the golden dagger in her hair:
The haughty vestures from her beauty fell,
Leaving her woman, simply pure and fair.

XLIV.

The gate was passed: before us, through the night,
We traced the dusky road, and far away,
Where ceased the stars, we knew the mountains lay.
There must we climb before their shoulders, white
With autumn rime, should redden to the day;
But now a line of faintly-scattered light
Plays o'er the dust, and the old olives calls
To ghostly life above the orchard-walls.

XLV.

A little chapel, built by pious hands,
That foot-sore pilgrims from the blistering soil
May turn, or laborers from summer toil
To rest that breathes of God, it open stands;
And there her shrine with daily flowers is drest,
Her lamp is nightly trimmed and fed with oil,
The Mater Dolorosa, in whose breast,
Bleeding, the seven swords of woe are pressed.

XLVI.

“Stay!” whispered Clelia, as the narrow vault
Yawned with its faded frescoes, and the lamp
Revealed, untouched by rust or blurred with damp,
The Virgin’s face : it beckoned us to halt
And lay our love before her feet divine,
A priestless sacrament, —so, kneeling there
In self-bestowed espousal, Clelia’s prayer
Spake to the Mother’s heart her trust in mine.

XLVII.

“O Sorrowing Mother ! Heaven’s exalted Queen !
Star of the Sea ! Lily among the Thorns !
Clothed with the sun, while round Thy feet serene
The crescent planet curves her silver horns,
Be Thou my star to still this trembling sea
Within my bosom, —let the love that mourns
One with the love that here rejoices, be,
Soothed in Thy peace, acceptable to Thee !

XLVIII.

“Thou who dost hide the maiden’s virgin fear
In Thine enclosed garden, Fountain sealed
Of Woman’s holiest secrets, bend Thine ear
To these weak words of one whose heart must yield
This temple of the body Thou didst wear
To love,—and by Thy pity, oft revealed,
Pure Priestess, hearken to Thy daughter’s prayer,
And bless the bond, of other blessing bare!

XLIX.

“Mother of Wisdom, in whose heart are thrust
The seven swords of Sorrow, in whose pain
Thy chaste Divinity draws near again
To maids and mothers, crying from the dust,—
Who ne’er forgettest any human woe,
Once doubly Thine, Thy grace and comfort show,
And perfect make, O Star above the Sea,
These nuptial pledges, only heard by Thee!

L.

“Incline Thy countenance from that clear throne
Beside Thy Son, for Thou didst ne’er deny
Compassion unto love, and I have known
No mother’s tenderness save Thine alone :
Behold ! I lift my face to meet, Thy child,
The chaste inquiry of Thy gentle eye :
O Mother kind, O Virgin Undeiled,
Pardon, accept, and bless, and sanctify !”

LI.

Then Clelia’s hand entrusted she to mine,
Who knelt beside her, and the vow she spake,
Weeping : “I take him, Mother, at Thy shrine.
Home, country, father, leave I for his sake,
Give my pure name, my maiden honor break
For him, my spouse !” And I : “I give my life,
Chaste, faithful to the end, to her, my wife,
Whom here, O Mother, at Thy hands I take !”

LII.

Thus, in the lack of Earth's ordaining rite,
Did our own selves our union consecrate;
But God was listening from the hollow Night.
Beyond the stars we felt His smile create
Dawn in the doubtful twilight of our fate:
Peace touched our hearts and sacredest content:
The veil was lifted from our perfect light
Of nuptial love, pure-burning, reverent.

LIII.

For Eden's lovely pastoral repeats
Its music, when, beneath the sky of youth
The full-formed man the answering woman meets,
And sex in sex, as heart in heart, the truth
Breaks in eternal beauty, fresh as when
Its primal rapture filled the green retreats
Of the unpeopled world — some sacred glen,
Where the first woman blessed the first of men!

LIV.

The Sorrowing Mother gazed. So pure the kiss
I gave, Her own divinest lips had ta'en
From mine no trace of sense-reflected stain;
But Gianni called us from the dream of bliss.
“Haste, Signor, haste!” he cried: “the Bear drops low;
Soon will the cocks in all the gardens crow
The morning watch: day comes, and night again,
But come to part, not mate, unless you go!”

LV.

Then silent, side by side, we forward fled
Through the chill airs of night: each falling hoof
Beat like a flail beneath the thresher's roof,
In quick, unvarying time: and rosy-red
Crept o'er the gray, as nimbly Gianni led
Our devious flight along the barren steeps,
Till, far beyond the sinking, misty deeps,
The sun forsook his Adriatic bed.

LVI.

There is a village perched, as you emerge
From the Santerno's long and winding vale
Towards Imolà, upon the cliffy verge
Of the last northern prop of Apennine,—
Old, yellow houses, hinting many a tale
Of ducal days and Este's tragic line,
And over all uplifted, orange-pale
Against the blue, a belfry slim and fine.

LVII.

With weary climbing of the rocky stair
Thither we came, and in a hostel rude
Sat down, outworn, to breathe securer air,
Our guide dismissed, nor eyes that might intrude,
Among the simple inmates of the place.
The brightest stars of heaven watched o'er us there
In sweet conjunction, every dread to chase,
To close the Past, and make the Future fair.

LVIII.

Ah, had we dared to linger in that nest,—
To watch, from under overhanging eaves,
The loaded vines, the poplars' twinkling leaves,—
Afar, the breadth of the Romagna's breast
And Massa's, Lugo's towers,—the little stir
Of innocent life, caress and be caressed,
Rank, Art, and Fame among the things that were,
And all her bliss in me, as mine in her!

LIX.

But Florence was too near: my purpose held
To bear and hide our happiness afar
In the dark mountains, lonely, greenest-delled;
And still, each night, the never-setting star
We followed took in heaven a loftier stand,—
Sparkled on other rivers, other towns,
Glinting from icy horns and snowy crowns
Until we trod the green Bavarian land!

LX.

And evermore, behind us on the road,
Pursuit, a phantom, drove. If we delayed,
Some coward pulse our meeting bosoms frayed;
Our tale the breezes blew, the sunshine glowed;
The stars our secret ecstasies betrayed:
Drunk with our passion's vintage, we must fill
The cup too full, and tremble lest it spill, —
Obeying, thus, the law we would evade.

LXI.

Now, from that finer ether sinking down
Into the humble, universal air,
The images of many a human care
That, wren-like, build beneath the thatch of love,
Came round us. O'er the levels, brown
With autumn stubble, the departing dove
Cooed her farewell to summer: rainy-cold
Through rocky gates the yellow Danube rolled.

LXII.

Grim were the mountains, with their dripping pines
Planted in sodden moss, and swiftly o'er
Their crests the clouds their flying fleeces tore :
The herd-boy, from his lair of furze and vines
Peered out, beside his dogs ; and forms uncouth,
The axemen, from the steeps descending, wore
The strength of manhood, but its grace no more, —
The lust, without the loveliness, of youth !

LXIII.

The swollen streams careered beside us, hoarse
As warning prophets in an evil age,
And through the stormy fastnesses our course,
Blown, buffeted with elemental rage,
Fell, with the falling night, to that lone vale
I pictured, with its meads of crocus-bloom, —
Ah me, engulfed and lost in drowning gloom,
The helpless sport and shipwreck of the gale !

LXIV.

Where now the bright autumnal bonfires? Where
The gold of beechen woods, the prodigal
And dazzling waste of color in its fall?
The brook-flowers, bluer than the morning-air?
“My pomp of welcome mocked you, love!” I sighed:
“The sign was false, the flattering dream denied:
Unkind is Nature, yet all skies are fair
To trusting hearts, when once their truth is tried!

LXV.

But Clelia shuddered, clinging to my heart
When the low roof received us, and the sound
Of threshing branches boomed and whistled round
Our cot, that stood a little way apart
Against the forest, from the village strayed,
Where cunning workmen in their prisons bound
The roaring Fiend of Fire, and forced his aid
To mould the crystal wonders of their trade.

LXVI.

Poor was our home, and when the rainy sky
Brought forth a child of Night, an Ethiop day,
And still the turbid torrents thundered by,
From the drear landscape she would turn away, —
Her thoughts, perchance, where gilded Florence lay, —
To hide a tear, or crush a rising sigh,
Then sing the sweet Italian songs, where run
Twin rills of words and music into one.

LXVII.

I, too, beneath the low-hung rafters, saw
In dusk that filtered through the narrow panes,
My palette spread with colors dull and raw,
Once ripe and juicy-fresh as blossom-stains.
The dim, beclouded season never brought
The light that flatters ; but its mists and rains
Like eating rust upon my canvas wrought,
And turned to substance cold the tinted thought.

LXVIII.

The pure Arcadian dream inspired me yet,
Spared to the world in matchless forms antique,
And in those radiant pictures, where are met
The soul of Christian Art, the brain of Greek,
Wedded in life which perfect color warms,
And power upholds, and tender grace informs;
Nor could my heart its young resolve forget
To carve my name upon that haughty peak.

LXIX.

So here I missed those living wells, whence drew
The Masters, breathing Art's best atmosphere,
With fine and noble forms forever near;—
No shape of man, but something did imbue
With hints of beauty, on those sunny hills:
And, helped on every side, the Ideal grew
Direct from Nature, as the rose distils
From earth undying scent and heavenly hue.

LXX.

Around me moved a rough and simple race
Whose natures, fresh and uncontaminate,
Gave truth to life and smoothed their toilful fate
With honesty and love — but lacked the grace
Of strength allied to beauty, or the free,
Unconscious charm of Southern symmetry,
And motions measured by a rhythm elate
And joyous as the cadence of the sea.

LXXI.

Our valley gave my hand but homely themes
Of peasant life, — plump children at their play;
The shepherd lads, the girls in quaint array;
Who lent no forms to shape the stately dreams
Which, prisoned in some void of fancy, pained
My thwarted aspiration, mocked the gleams
Ideal of regions whitherward I strained,
And crushed my hope with yearnings unattained.

LXXII.

For if, at times, among the slaves who fed
The ever-burning kilns, in fiercest glow
Some naked torso momentarily would show
Like Hell's strong angel, dipped in lurid red,
No model this for Saviour, seraph, saint,
Ensphered in golden ether : Labor's taint
Defaced the form, and here 't were vain, I said,
Some lovely hint to find, and finding, paint !

LXXIII.

Ah, Art and Love ! Immortal brother-gods,
That will not dwell together, nor apart,
But make your temple in your servant's heart
A house of battle ! One his forehead nods
In drowsy bliss, and will not be disturbed,
The other's eager forces work uncurbed,
Yet most in each the other lives ; and each
Mounts by the other's help his crown to reach.

LXXIV.

To Love my debt was greatest: I compelled
Back to their sleep the dreams that stung in vain,
And folded Clelia in a love which held
The heart all fire, although its flame was nursed
By embers borrowed from the smouldering brain.
For her had Art aspired; but now, reversed
The duty, Art for her must abnegate
Its restless, proud resolves, and idly wait.

LXXV.

The rains had whitened in the upper air,
And left their chill memorials glittering now
On Arber's shoulders, Ossa's hornèd brow;
The summer forest of its gold was bare;
Loud o'er the changeless pines November drove
His frosty steeds, through narrowing days that wear
No light; and Winter settled from above,
White, heavy, cold, around our nest of love.

LXXVI.

The sportive fantasies of wind and snow,
The corniced billows which they love to pile,
The ermined woods, with boughs depending low,
To buttress frozenly each darksome aisle,
The spectral hills which twilight veils in dun,
The season's hushing sounds, — my Clelia won
From haunting memories, and stayed awhile
Her home-sick pining for the Tuscan sun.

LXXVII.

Only, when after briefest day, the moon
Poured down an icy light, and all around
Came from the iron woods a crackling sound,
As from the stealthy steps of Cold, and soon
The long-drawn howl of famished wolf was heard
Far in the mountains, like a shuddering bird
Beside my heart a nestling place she found,
And smiled to hear my fond, assuring word.

LXXVIII.

So drifted on, till Death's white shadow passed
From edgèd air and stony earth, our fate :
Then from the milder cloud and loosening blast
Unto his sunnier nooks returning late,
Came Life, and let his flowery footprint stand.
Softer than wing of dove, the winds at last
Kissed where they smote ; the skies were blue and bland,
And in their lap reposed the ravished land.

LXXIX.

Then tears of gummy crystal wept the pine,
And like a phantom plume, the sea-green larch
Was dropped along the mountain's lifted arch,
And morning on the meadows seemed to shine,
All day, in blossoms : cuckoo-songs were sweet,
And sweet the pastoral music of the kine
Chiming a thousand bells aloft, to meet
The herdsman's horn, the young lamb's wandering bleat !

LXXX.

Under the forest's sombre eaves there slept
No darkness, but a balsam-breathing shade,
Rained through with light: the hurrying waters made
Music amid the solitude, and swept
Their noise of liquid laughter from afar,
Through smells of sprouting leaf and trampled grass,
And thousand tints of flowery bell and star,
To sing the year's one idyl ere it pass!

LXXXI.

And down the happy valleys wandered we,
Released and glad, the children of the sun, —
I by adoption and by nature she, —
And still our love a riper color won
From the strong god in whom all colors burn.
The Earth regained her ancient alchemy
To cheat our souls with dreams of what might be,
And never is, — yet, wherefore these unlearn?

LXXXII.

For they reclothe us with a mantle, lent
From the bright wardrobe of the Gods: the powers,
The glories of the Possible are ours:
We breathe the pure, sustaining element
Above the dust of life,—steal fresh content
From distant gleams of never-gathered flowers,—
Believing, rise: our very failures wear
Immortal grace from what we vainly dare!

LXXXIII.

From dreams like these is shaped the splendid act
In painters', poets' brains: we let them grow,
And as the season rolled in richer flow
To summer, from their waves a wondrous fact
Uprose, and shamed them with diviner glow,—
A tremulous secret, mystic, scarce-confessed,
That, star-like, throbs within the coarsest breast,
And sets God's joy beside His creature's woe.

LXXXIV.

As one may see, along some April rill,
By richest mould and softest dew-fall fed,
The day-break blossom of a daffodil
Send from its heart a tenderer blossom still,
Flower bearing flower, so fair a marvel shed
Its bliss on Clelia's being; and she smiled
With those prophetic raptures which fulfil
The mother's nature ere she clasps her child.

LXXXV.

Between our hearts, embracing both, there stole
A silent Presence, like to that which reigns
In Heaven, when God another world ordains.
Here, in its genesis, a formless soul
Waited the living garment it should wear
Of holiest flesh, though ours were dark with stains,—
Yet clouds that blot the blue, eternal air,
Upon their folds the rainbow's beauty bear!

LXXXVI.

Our bliss in each bowed humbly down before
This revelation : other glory came,
A solemn joy, a whitest offering-flame
Fed with our prayers, and sent its radiance o'er
The brinks of life, and thus the season wore
In fond suspense and sacred idleness —
A long, long summer Sabbath — to the shore
Where Death should smite or Life should doubly bless.

LXXXVII.

And none of all the folk we moved among
In that lone valley, whether man or maid,
Or weary woman, prematurely wrung
To bear the lusty flock that round her played,
But spake to Clelia in a gentler tongue
And unto her their timid reverence paid,
As, in her life repeated, one might see
Madonna's pure maternal sanctity!

LXXXVIII.

All knew the lady, beautiful and tall, —
Dark, yet so pale in her strange loveliness,
Whom oft they saw with gliding footstep press
The meads, the forest's golden floor; and all
Knew the enchanted voice, whose alien song
Silenced the mountains, till the woodman lone
His axe let fall, and dreamed and listened long, —
The key-flower plucked, the fairy gold his own!

LXXXIX.

Never, they said, did year its bounty shower
So plenteously upon their fields, as now.
The lady brought their fortune: many a vow
Would rise to help her in her woman's hour
Of pain and joy, and what their hands could do
(The will was boundless, though so mean the power)
Was hers, — their queen, the fairest thing they knew
Within the circle of the mountains blue.

XC.

And Autumn came, like him from Edom, him
With garments dyed, from Bozrah, glorious
In his apparel; yet his gold was dim,
His crimsons pale, beside the splendors warm
Wherewith the ripened time transfigured us.
The precious atoms drawn from heaven and earth,
And rocked by Love's own music into form,
Compacted lived: a soul awaited birth.

XCI.

A soul was born. The hazy-mantled sun
Looked in on Clelia, radiant as a saint
Who triumphs over torture, pale and faint
From parted life,—and kissed the life begun
With tender light, as quick to recognize
His child, in exile: the unconscious one,—
Stray lamb of heaven, whom tears might best baptize,—
Closed on her happy breast his mother's eyes.

XCII.

Her eyes they were: her fresh-born beauty took
Its seat in man, that woman's heart might bow
One day, before the magic of that look
Which conquered man and held him captive now.
The frail and precious mould which drew from me
Naught but its sex, her likeness did endow
With breathing grace and witching symmetry,
As once in baby demigod might be.

XCIII.

So came from him — as in Correggio's "Night"
The body of the Holy Child illumines
The stable dark, the starry Syrian glooms,
The rapt, adoring faces, — sudden light
For that dark season when the sun hung low;
And warmth, when earth again lay cold and white;
And peace, Love reconciled with Life to know;
And promise, kindling Art to rosier glow.

XCIV.

Here dawned the inspiration, long delayed,
The light of loftier fancy. As she pressed,
Cradled against her balmy mother-breast,
The child — a pink on sun-kissed lilies laid —
I saw the type of old achievement won
In them, the holy hint their forms conveyed :
And lovelier never God's Elected Maid
And Goddess-Mother dreamed Urbino's son !

XCV.

But she — when first mine eager hand would seize
Her perfect beauty — troubled grew, and pale.
“ Dear Egon, No ! ” she said : “ my heart would fail,
Alarmed for love that wraps in sanctities
Its earthly form : for see ! the babe may lie
With white, untainted soul, and in his eye
The light of Heaven, and pure as almond-flowers
His dimpling flesh, — but, Egon, he is ours !

XCVI.

“If blessing may be forfeited, to set
A child, the loveliest, in the place divine
Of Infant God, it were more impious yet
To veil the Mother’s countenance in mine :
Ah, how should I, to human love though fair,
Assume her grace and with her pity shine, —
Profane usurpress of her sacred shrine,
To cheat the vow and intercept the prayer !”

XCVII.

A woman’s causeless fancy ! What I said
I scarce remember, — that the face I stole
Had brought herself, and if the half so wrought,
A surer blessing now must bring the whole,
And laurel cast, not jasmine, on my head.
The profanation was a thing of thought,
Or touched the artist only : who could paint,
If saint alone dare model be for saint ?

XCVIII.

And so, by Art possessed, I would not see
Forebodings which in woman's finer sense
Arise, and draw their own fulfilment thence,—
Light clouds, yet hide the bolts of Destiny
And darken life, ere long. I gave, in joy,
To fleeting grace immortal permanence,
And dreamed of coming fame for all the three,
Myself, the fairest mother, and the boy!

XCIX.

She sat, in crimson robe and mantle blue,
Fondling the child in holy nakedness,
Resigned and calm,—alas! I could not guess
The haunting fear that daily deeper grew
In the sweet face that would its fear subdue,
Nor make my hand's creative rapture less:
But cold her kisses to my own replied,
And when the work completed stood—she sighed.

C.

And from that hour a shadow seemed to hang
Around her life : our idyl breathed no more
Its flute-like joy in every strain she sang :
Her step the measures of an anthem wore,
That hushes, soothes, yet makes not wholly sad ;
And if, at times, my heart confessed a pang
To note the haunted gleam her features had,
I failed to read the prophecy it bore.

CI.

Again the summer beckoned from the hills,
And back from Daulis came the nightingale ;
But when the willows shook by meadow-rills
Their sheeted silver, Clelia's cheek grew pale.
She spoke not ; but I knew her fancy said
So shook the olives now in Arno's vale,
So flashed the brook along its pebbly bed,
Through bosky oleanders, roofed with red !

CII.

This cheer I gave: "Be sure my fame awaits
The work of love: this cloud will break, and we
Walk in the golden airs of Tuscany,
Guarded by that renown which consecrates
Our fault, if love be such; and fame shall be
My shield, to shame your father's heraldry,
And set you in your ancient halls. Take heart,
And as my love you trusted, trust my art!"

CIII.

She faintly smiled,—if smile the lips could stir
Which more of yearning than of hope expressed;
A filmy mask to hide the warning guest
Of thought which evermore abode in her:
And then she kissed me,—not, as once, with fire
And lingering sweetness drawn from love's desire,
But soft, as Heaven's angelic messenger
Might touch the lips of prayer, and make them blest!

THE
PICTURE OF ST. JOHN.



BOOK III.

BOOK III.



THE CHILD.

I.

SAD Son of Earth, if ever to thy care
Some god intrust the dazzling gift of joy,
Within thy trembling hands the burden bear
As if the frailest crystal shell it were,
One thrill of exultation might destroy!
Look to thy feet, take heed where thou shalt stand,
And arm thine eyes with fear, thy heart with prayer,
Like one who travels in a hostile land!

II.

For, ever hovering in the heart of day
Unseen, above thee wait the Powers malign,
Who scent thy bliss as vultures scent decay :
Unveil thy secret, give one gladsome sign,
Send up one thought to chant beside the lark
In airy poise, and lo ! the sky is dark
With swooping wings, — thy gift is snatched away
Ere dies the rapture which proclaimed it thine !

III.

We plan the houses which are never built :
The volumes which our precious thoughts enclose
Are never written : in the falchion's hilt
Sleeps nobler daring than the hero shows :
And never Fate allows a life to give
The measure of a soul, — but incomplete
Expression and imperfect action meet,
To form the tintless sketch of what we live.

IV.

But I was young, and I believed there might
Be perfect bounty, — Fame and Love unite
To weave for me the yet ungranted crown,
Ah, fool! and in my happy prophecy
Evoked a doom to pluck its promise down.
'Tis when the distant mountains clearest be,
Seen through the diamond lenses of the air,
That storms their fiercest bolts are forging there!

V.

I would not see the path that led apart
My Clelia's feet, as 't were on hills of cloud,
But deemed the saintler light, whereto I bowed
In reverence of mine adoring heart,
The mother's nature: day by day I smiled,
As higher, further drawn, my dreams avowed
Diviner types of beauty, — whence, beguiled,
Her robes of heaven I wrapped around her child.

VI.

Our daily miracle was he: a bud
Steeped in the scents of Eden, balmy-fair,
The world's pure morning bright upon his hair,
And life's unopened roses in his blood!
In the blank eyes of birth a timorous star
Of wonder sparkled, as the soul awoke,
And from his tongue a brook-like babbling broke,—
A strange, melodious language from afar!

VII.

His body showed, in every dimpled swell,
The pink and pearl of Ocean's loveliest shell,
And swift the little pulses throbbed along
Their turquoise paths, the soft breast rose and fell
As to the music of a dancing song,
And all the darling graces which belong
To babyhood, and breathe from every limb,
Made life more beautiful, revealed in him.

VIII.

His mother's face I dared not paint again,
For now, infected by her mystic dread,
The picture smote me with reproachful pain ;
But often, bending o'er his cradle-bed
To learn by heart the wondrous tints and lines
That charmed me so, my kindling fancy said :
" By thee, my Cherub, shall mine art be led
To clasp the Truth it now but half divines !

IX.

" If I have sinned, to set thee in the place
Of Infant God, the hand that here offends
Shall owe its cunning to thy growing grace,
And from thy loveliness make late amends.
Six summers more, and I shall bid thee stand
Before me, with uplift, prophetic face,
And there St. John shall grow beneath my hand,—
A bright boy-angel in a desert land !

X.

“Six summers more, and then, as Ganymede’s,
Thy rosy limbs against the dark-blue sky
Shall press the eagle’s plumage as he speeds;
Or darling Hylas, ’mid Scamander’s reeds,
Borrow thy beauty : six again, and I
Shall from thy lithesome adolescence take
My young St. George, my victor knight, and make
Beneath thy sword once more the Dragon die !

XI.

“Art thou not mine ? and wilt thou not repay
My love with help unconsciously bestowed ?
In thy fresh being, in its bright abode,
Shall I not find my morning-star, my day ?
Rejoice ! one life, at least, shall deathless be, —
One perfect form grow ripe, but not decay :
Through mine own blood shall I my triumph see,
And give to glory what I steal from thee !”

XII.

But soon assailed my home the need of gold,
The miserable wants that plague and fret,
Repeated ever, battling with our hold
On all immortal aims, lest, over-bold
In arrogance of gift, we dare forget
The balanced curse : ah me ! that finest powers
Must stoop to menial services, and set
Their growth below the unlaborious flowers !

XIII.

The precious few, whose voice of praise instructs
The ignorant world, were silent, I unknown :
My love had spurned the pathway that conducts
To those warm gardens where success is grown,
And where the plant, at first so doubtful, frail,
Strengthens apace and shoots above the pale :
Upon that barren soil I stood alone,
And withered fast, — for what could love avail ?

XIV.

One day, in indolence of sheer despair,
I sat with hanging arm, the colors dried
Upon my palette: sudden, at my side
Knelt Clelia, lifting through her falling hair
A look that stabbed me with its tearful care;
And words that came like swiftly-dropping tears
Made my heart ache and shiver in mine ears,
As thus in sorrow and in love she cried:

XV.

“O Egon, mine the fault! I should have dared
Defy the compact,—should have set you, love,
As far in station as in soul above
These mocking wants—mine idle fortune shared
With your achievement! Coward heart, that fled
The post of righteous battle, and prepared
For you, whose hand and brain I could not wed,
Meaning to bless, a martyrdom instead!

XVI.

“I hold you back, alas ! when you aspire ;
I chain your spirit when it pants to soar :
I, proud to kindle, glad to feed the fire,
But heap cold ashes on its fading core !
Command me, Egon ! shall I seek the sire
Whose lonely house might welcome me once more,
And mine — my twain belovèd ? Let me make
This late, last trial for our future’s sake !”

XVII.

Then ceased her plea, but tears, more touching, filled
The gap of silence. Out of regions black
Wherein my fancy drifted as it willed
And drew its hopeless pictures, speeding back,
This added woe a final courage gave :
Her words, even while they smote, a force instilled
That stung my soul to action prompt and brave —
And I stood up, no more a yielding slave !

XVIII.

“Not thine, my Clelia!” soothing her, I said,
“Not thine the fault — nor ours; but Demons wait
To thwart the shining purposes of Fate,
And not a crown descends on any head
Ere half its fairest leaves are plucked or dead:
Yet be it as thou wilt, — who bore thee thence
Must in thy father’s house thee reinstate,
Or bear — not thou — the weight of his offence.

XIX.

“Come, thou art pale, and sad, and sick for home,
My summer lily — nursling of the sun!
But thou shalt blossom in the breeze of Rome,
And dip thy feet in Baïæ’s whispering foam,
And in the torn Abruzzi valleys, dun
With August stubble, watch thy wild fawn run, —
I swear it! With the melting of the snow,
If Fortune or if Ruin guide, we go!”

XX.

And soon there came, as 't were an answering hint
From heaven, the tardy gold Madonna brought, —
But I unto that end had gladly wrought
Heart's-blood to coin, and drained the ruddy mint
Of life, again the mellow songs to hear
That told how sunward turned her happy thought :
That sang to sleep her soul's unbodied fear,
And led her through the darkness of the year!

XXI.

Alas! 't was not so written. Day by day
Her cheek grew thin, her footstep faint and slow ;
And yet so fondly, with such hopeful play
Her pulses beat, they masked the coming woe.
Joy dwelt with her, and in her eager breath
His cymbals drowned the hollow drums of Death :
Life showered its promise, surer to betray,
And the false Future crumbled fast away.



XXII.

Ay, she was happy! God be thanked for this,
That she was happy! — happier than she knew,
Had even the hope that cheated her been true;
For from her face there beamed such wondrous bliss,
As cannot find fulfilment here, and dies.
God's peace and pardon touched me in her kiss,
Heaven's morning dawned and brightened in her eyes,
And o'er the Tuscan arched remoter skies!

XXIII.

Dazzled with light, I could not see the close
So near and dark, and every day that won
Some warmer life from the returning sun,
Took from the menaces that interpose
Between the plan and deed. I dared to dream
Her dreams, and paint them lovelier as they rose,
Till from the echoing hollows one wild stream
Sprang to proclaim the melting of the snows.

XXIV.

Then — how she smiled ! And I the casement wide
To that triumphant sound must throw, despite
The bitter air ; and, soothed and satisfied,
She slept until the middle watch of night.
I watched beside her : dim the taper's light
Before the corner-shrine, — the walls in shade
Glimmered, but through the window all was white
In crystal moonshine, and the winds were laid.

XXV.

And awe and shuddering fell upon my soul.
Out of the silence came, if not a sound,
The sense of sphery music, far, profound,
As Earth, revolving on her moveless pole,
Might breathe to God : and at the casement shone
Something — a radiant bird it seemed, — alone,
And beautiful, and strange : its plumes around
Played the soft fire of stars whence it had flown.

XXVI.

A silver beak, a diamond eye, — dispread
The hovering wings, as winnowing music out ;
And richer still the glory grew about
The shadowy room, crept over Clelia's bed
And hung, a shimmering circle, round her head :
Then marked I that her eyes were wide and clear,
Nor wondered at the vision. All my fear
Fled when she spoke, and these the words she said :

XXVII.

“Thou call'st, and I am ready. Ah, I see
The shining field of lilies in the moon,
So white, so fair ! Yet how depart with thee,
And leave the bliss of threefold life so soon ?
Peace, fainting heart ! Though sweet it were to stay,
Sweet messenger, thy summons I obey :
And now the mountains part, and now the free
Wide ocean gleams beneath a golden day !

XXVIII.

“How still they lie, the olive-sandalled slopes,
The gardens and the towers! But floating o’er
Their shaded sleep, lo! some diviner shore,
Deep down the bright, unmeasured distance, opes
Its breathing valleys: wait for me! I haste,
But am not free: till morning let me taste
The last regret of faithful love once more,
Then shall I walk with thee yon liliated floor!”

XXIX.

The bright Thing fled, the moon went down the west.
Long lay she silent, sleepless; nor might I
Break with a sound the hush of ecstasy,
The strange, unearthly peace, till from his rest
The child awoke with soft, imploring cry:
Then she, with feeble hands outreaching, laid
His little cheek to hers, and softly made
His murmurs cease upon her mother-breast.

XXX.

My trance dissolved at once, and falling prone
In agony of tears, as falls a wave
With choked susurrus in some hollow cave,
Brake forth my life's lament and bitter moan.
I shook with passionate grief: I murmured: "Stay!
Have I not sworn to give thee back thine own?
False was the token, false!" She answered: "Nay,
It says, Farewell! and yonder dawns the day."

XXXI.

No more! I said farewell: withdrawn afar,
Still faintly came to me, its clasping shore,
When morning drowned the wintry morning-star,
Her ebbing life; then paused—and came no more!
And blue the mocking sky, and loud the roar
Of loosened waters, leaping down the glen:
The songs of children and the shouts of men
Flouted the awful Shadow at my door!

XXXII.

And chill my heart became, a sepulchre
Sealed with the sudden ice of frozen tears :
I sat in stony calm, and looked at her,
Flown in the brightness of her beauteous years,
And not a pulse with conscious sorrow beat ;
Nor, when they robed her in her winding-sheet,
Did any pang my silent bosom stir,
But pain, like bliss, seemed of the things that were.

XXXIII.

With cold and changeless face beside her grave
I stood, and coldly heard the shuddering sound
Of coffin-echoes, smothered underground :
The tints I marked, the mournful mountains gave, —
Faces and garments of the throngs around, —
The sexton's knotted hands, the light and shade
That strangely through the moving colors played, —
So, feeling dead, Art's habit held me bound !

XXXIV.

My body moved in its mechanic course
Of soulless functions : thought and passion ceased,
Or blindly stirred with undirected force,—
A weary trance, which only Time decreased
By slow reductions ; though the blunted sense
Sought in its loss of grief a new remorse,
(As love lay dead in blank indifference,)
And courted pain, to draw some comfort thence !

XXXV.

Yet, very slowly, Feeling's self was born
Of chance forgetfulness : when meadows took
A greener hem along the winding brook,
And buds were balmy in the fresh May-morn,
Oft would I turn, as though her step to wait ;
Or ask the songless echoes why so late
Her song delayed ; or from my lonely bed
At midnight start, and weep to find her fled !

XXXVI.

And with the pains of healing came a care
For him, her child : she had not wholly died ;
And what of her lost being he might wear
Was doubly mine through all the years untried,
To love, and give me love. Him would I bear
Beyond the Alps, forth from this fatal zone,
To make his mother's land and speech his own,
And keep her beauty at his father's side !

XXXVII.

So forth we fared : the faithful peasant nurse
Who guarded now his life, should guard it still.
We hastened on : there seemed a brooding curse
Upon the valley. Many a brawling rill
We left behind, and many a darksome hill,
Long fens, and clay-white rivers of the plain,
Then mountains clad in thunder,—and again
Soared the high Alps, and sparkled, white and chill

XXXVIII.

To seek some quiet, southward-opening vale
Beside the Adige, was my first design ;
And sweetly hailed along the Brenner's line
With songs of Tyrol, welcomed by the gale
That floated from the musky slopes of vine,
With summer on its wings, I wandered down
To fix our home in some delightful town, —
But when the first we reached, there came a sign.

XXXIX.

The bells were tolling, — not with nuptial joy,
But heavily, sadly : down the winding street
The pattering tumult came of children's feet,
Followed by men who bore a snow-pale boy
Upon a flowery bier. The sunshine clung,
Caressing brow and cheek, — he was so young
Even Nature felt her darling's loss, — and sweet
The burial hymn by childish mourners sung.

XL.

“He must not see the dead!” Thus unto me
The nurse, and muffled him with trembling hand.
But something touched, in that sad harmony,
The infant’s soul: he struggled and was free
A moment, saw the dead, nor could withstand
The strange desire that hungered in his eye,
And stretched his little arms, and made a cry,—
While she, in foolish terror, turned to me:

XLI.

“Now, God have mercy, master! rest not here,
Or he will die!” ’T was but the causeless whim
Of ignorance, and yet, a formless fear
O’ercame my heart, and darkly menaced him
As with his mother’s fond, foreboding dread:
Then, wild with haste to lift the shadow dim
Which seemed already settling round his head,
That hour we left, and ever southward sped.

XLII.

Past wondrous mountains, peaked with obelisks,
With pyramids and domes of dolomite
That burned vermilion in the dying light, —
Craggs where the hunter with a thousand risks
The steinbok follows, — world of strength and song
Under the stars, among the fields of white,
While deep below, the broad vale winds along
Through corn and wine, secure from winter's wrong!

XLIII.

And when we came where, over gay arcades,
The towers of old Tridentum pierce the air,
I breathed the fascination which pervades
The bright approaches to a region, fair
With Art whose equal grace and glory falls
Like dew or sun, — around me everywhere
The forms of free Arcadian festivals,
The lovely speech, the blossom-tinted walls!

XLIV.

My plan complete, the foolish servitress
Back to her dark Bohemian home I sent,
And gave my boy to one whose gentleness
Fell gentlier from her Tuscan tongue. We went
By lonely roads, where over Garda's lake
Their brows the cloven-hearted mountains bent,
To lands divine, where Como's waters make
Twin arms, to clasp them for their beauty's sake!

XLV.

There ceased my wanderings, finding what I sought:
The charms of water, earth, and air allied,—
Secluded homes, with prospects free and wide
Around a princely world, which thither brought
Only the aspect of its holiday,
And made its emulous, unsleeping pride
Put on the yoke of Nature, and obey
Her mood of ornament, her summer play.

XLVI.

The shapely hills, whose summits towered remote
In rosy air, might smile in soft disdain
Of palaces that strung a jewelled chain
About their feet, and far-off, seemed to float
On violet-misted waters; yet they wore
Their groves and gardens like a festal train,
And in the mirror of the crystal plain
Steep vied with steep, shore emulated shore!

XLVII.

Above Bellagio, on the ridge that leans
To meet, on either side, the parted blue,
There is a cottage, which the olive screens
From sight of those who come the pomp to view
Of Villa Serbelloni: thrust apart
Beside a quarry whence the pile they drew,—
A home for simple needs and straitened means,
For lonely labor and a brooding heart.

XLVIII.

There housed, the restful quiet for a time
Like a delicious opiate soothed my sense.
Each sight and sound of that recovered clime
Infused my life in balmy indolence,
That blunted pain, nor gave a bliss too keen :
And, one by one, fell off each weak defence
Of Sorrow, melted Memory's icy rime,
And Hope discovered that her buds were green.

XLIX.

Too young was I, too filled with blood and fire,
To clothe myself with ultimate despair.
Drinking with eager breast that idle air,
Color with eyes new-bathed, that could not tire,
And stung by form, and wooed by moving grace,
And warmed with beauty, should I not aspire
My misty dreams with substance to replace,
Nor ghosts beget, but an immortal race?

L.

Yea ! rather close, as in a sainted shrine,
My life's most lovely, tender episode,
Renounce the ordination it bestowed,
And only taste its sacramental wine
In those brief Sabbaths, when the heart demands
Solemn repose and sustenance divine !
Yet lives the Artist in these restless hands,
And waiting, here, the rich material stands !

LI.

My thoughts, reacting from their former height,
And of their old impatience sadly healed,
Abjured the rapture of the starry flight
And turned, in penance, to the lowliest field :
Yet lo ! the forms of this extreme revealed
Mysterious meaning, unimagined worth
Of lines and tints, clear shadow, living light, —
The key of Art, rusting in common earth !

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LII.

Had I not sought, I asked myself, the far
Result, and haughtily disdained the source?
From myriad threads hangs many-stranded Force, —
Compact of gloomy atoms, burns the star!
Of earth are all foundations; and of old
On mounds of clay were lifted to their place
Shafts of eternal temples. We behold
The noble end, whereto no means are base.

LIII.

Let me begin, I said, this alphabet,
These runes of Art, profusely scattered o'er
The quarry, vineyard, garden, cliff, and shore,
Diffused in air, upon the water set
In bloom and sparkle, — that my pencil yet
Through lower cunning climb along the scale
Of things, achieving higher: 't were less regret,
Heroic failure, — but I shall not fail!

LIV.

I loved my work. The pencil's broader play
Had grown an appetite, wherewith I toyed
Until my petted hand would scarce obey
This new compulsion. Labor unenjoyed,
Save by the flattered will, with every day
Demands new courage, resolution fresh,
The old, seductive longings to allay,
That sting the spirit, as its lust the flesh.

LV.

I loved my work; and therefore vowed to love
All subjects, finding Art in everything, —
The angel's plumage in the bird's plain wing, —
Until such time as I might rise above
The conquered matter, to the power supreme
Which takes, rejects, adorns, — a rightful king,
Whose hand completes the subtly-hinted scheme,
And blends in equal truth the Fact and Dream!

LVI.

And now commenced a second life, wherein
Myself and Agatha and Angelo
Beheld the lonely seasons come and go,
Contented,—whether gray with hoar-frost thin
The aloes stiffened, or the passion-flower
Enriched the summer heats, or autumn shower
Rejoiced the yellow fig-leaves wide to blow :—
So still that life, we scarcely felt its flow.

LVII.

How guileless, sweet, the infancy he knew,
Loved for his own and for his mother's sake !
How fresh in sunny loveliness he grew,
Fanned by the breezes of the Larian lake,
My little Angelo, my baby-friend,
My boy, my blessing !—while for him I drew
A thousand futures, brightening to the end ;
Long paths of light, with ne'er a cloudy break !

LVIII.

For, lisping in a sweeter tongue than mine,
'T was his delight around the spot to play
Where fast I wrought in unillusive day, —
Where he might chase from rock or rustling vine
The golden lizard ; seek the mellow peach,
Wind-shaken ; or, where spread the branchy pine
His coverture of woven shade and shine,
Sleep, lulled by murmurs of the pebbly beach.

LIX.

Along San Primo's chestnut-shaded sides,
Through fields of thyme and spiky lavender
And yellow broom, wherein the she-goat hides
Her yeanling kid, and wild bees ever stir
The drifted blossoms, — high and breezy downs, —
I led his steps, and watched his young eye glance
In brightening wonder o'er the fair expanse
Of mountain, lake, and lake-reflected towns !

LX.

Or, crossing to the lofty Leccan shore,
I bade him see the Fiume-latte leap
Through shivered rainbows down the hollow steep,
A meteor of the morning; high and hoar
The Alp that fed it leaned against the blue, —
But siren-voices chanted in the roar,
Enticing, mocking: shudderingly he drew
Back from the shifting whirls of endless dew.

LXI.

'T was otherwise, when borne in dancing bark
Across the wave, where Sommariva's walls
Flash from the starred magnolia's breathing dark,
High o'er its terraced roses, fountain-falls
And bosky laurels. In that garden he
Chirruped and fluttered like a callow lark,
With dim fore-feeling of the azure free,
Sustaining wing and strength of songful glee!

LXII.

That pomp of leafy beauty he would greet
As 't were his own transmitted heritage :
He looked a pride beyond his tender age,
A lordly spirit moved his little feet, —
Whereat I smiled, and thought: perchance 't is meet
Pandolfo's blood repairs its tarnished claim,
But mine, ere long, shall yet more proudly beat,
To make him heritor of fresher fame.

LXIII.

No thing that I might paint, — a sunset cloud,
A rosy islet of the amber sky, —
A lily-branch, — the azure-emerald dye
Of neck and crest that makes the peacock proud, —
Or plume of fern, or berried ivy-braid,
Or sheen of sliding waters, — e'er could vie
With the least loveliness his form conveyed
In outline, motion, daintiest light and shade.

LXIV.

Not yet would I indulge the rapturous task,
The crown of labor ; though my weary brain
Ached from the mimicry of Nature's mask,
And yearned for human themes. It was in vain,
My vow, that patient bondage to sustain :
Some unsubdued desire began to ask :
"How shall these soulless images be warmed?
Or Life be learned from matter uninformed?"

LXV.

"Then Life!" I said: "but cautiously and slow,—
Pure human types, that, from the common base
By due degrees the spirit find its place,
And climb to passion and supernal glow
Of Heaven's beatitude. The level track
Once let me tread, nor need to stoop so low
Beneath my dreams, and thus their hope efface,—
But late, in nobler guise, receive them back."

LXVI.

So, venturing no further, I began
The work I craved, and only what I found
In limber child, or steely-sinewed man,
Or supple maiden, drew: within that bound
Such excellence I saw, as told how much,
Despising truth, I strayed: with reverent touch
God's architecture did my pencil trace
In joint and limb, as in the godlike face.

LXVII.

Each part expressed its nicely-measured share
In the mysterious being of the whole:
Not from the eye or lip looked forth the soul,
But made her habitation everywhere
Within the bounds of flesh; and Art might steal,
As once, of old, her purest triumphs there.
Go see the headless Ilionëus kneel,
And thou the torso's agony shalt feel!

LXVIII.

The blameless spirit of a lofty aim
 Sees not a line that asks to be concealed
 By dexterous evasion ; but, revealed
 As truth demands, doth Nature smite with shame
 Them, who with artifice of ivy-leaf
 Unsex the splendid loins, or shrink the frame
 From life's pure honesty, as shrinks a thief,
 While stands a hero ignorant of blame !

LXIX.

What joy it was, from dead material forms,
 Opaque, one-featured, and unchangeable,
 To turn, and track the shifting life that warms
 The shape of Man !— within whose texture dwell
 Uncounted lines of beauty, tints unguessed
 On luminous height, in softly-shaded dell,
 And myriad postures, moving or at rest, —
 All phases fair, and each, in turn, the best !

LXX.

The rich ideal promise these convey,
Which in the forms of Earth can never live.
Each plastic soul has yet the power to give
A separate model to its subject clay,
And finely works its cunning likeness out:
To men a block, to me a statue lay
In each, distinct in being, draped about
With mystery, touched with Beauty's random ray!

LXXI.

Now Fame approached, when I expected least
Her noisy greeting: 't was the olden tale.
Half-scornfully I gave; yet men increased
Their golden worth, the more I felt them fail,
My painful counterfeits of lifeless things.
"Behold!" they cried: "this wondrous artist brings
Each leaf and vein of meadow-blossoms pale,
The agate's streaks, the meal of mothy wings!"

LXXII.

And truly, o'er a wayside-weed they raised
A sound of marvel, found in lichen-rust
Of ancient stones a glory, stood amazed
To view a melon, gray with summer dust,
And so these rudimental labors praised,
The Tempter whispered to my flattered ear:
"Why seek the unattained, — thy fame is here!"
"Avaunt!" I cried: "in mine own soul I trust!"

LXXIII.

A little while, I thought, and I shall know
The stamp and sentence of my destiny, —
The fateful crisis, whence my life shall be
A power, a triumph, an immortal show,
A kindling inspiration: or be classed
(As many a noble brother in the Past)
Pictor Ignotus: as it happens, so
Shall turn the fortunes of my Angelo!

LXXIV.

For in his childish life, expanding now,
The spirit dawned which must his future guide, —
The little prattler, with his open brow,
His clear, dark eye, his mouth too sweet for pride,
Too proud for infancy! “My boy, decide,”
I said: “wilt painter be? or rather lord
Over a marble house, a steed and sword?”
His visage flashed: he paused not, but replied:

LXXV.

“Give me a marble house, as white and tall
As Sommariva’s! Give me horse and hound,
A golden sword, and servants in the hall,
And thou and I be masters over all,
My father!” In that hope a joy he found,
And oft in freaks of fancied lordship made
The splendors his: ah, boy! thy wish betrayed
The blood that beats to rise, and dare not fall.

LXXVI.

Did Clelia's spirit yearn, what time she bore
The unborn burden, for her lost estate?
Home-sick and pining, lorn and desolate
Except for love, did she, in thought, count o'er
The graceful charms of that luxurious nest
Wherefrom I stole her? Then was I unblest,
Save he inherited her pilfered fate,
And trod, for her, Pandolfo's palace-floor.

LXXVII.

This to achieve, which duty to the dead
Had made a haunting conscience, now became
An added sting to goad me on to fame,
And beckoned still, as by his cradle-bed,
But fairer, many a clear, inspiring dream
Of noble pictures, from his beauty drawn :
His fortune's instrument should be the theme
Himself must give, — the young, divine St. John !

LXXVIII.

The current of my dreams, directed thus,
Flowed ever swifter, evermore to him.
Along the coves where stripling boatmen swim
I watched him oft, like Morn's young Genius,
Dropped from her rose-cloud on the silver sand,
Her rosy breath upon each ivory limb
Kissed by the clasping waters, green and dim,
And craved the hour when he should bless my hand.

LXXIX.

Meanwhile, until his round and dimpling grace
Put on the dainty slenderness that lies
In youth, and fuller soul inform his face,
Unweariedly I wrought, Murillo-wise,
On idle groups of tawny peasant-boys, —
The coarser wild-weeds of his garden-race, —
In the fine postures which they improvise,
And mellow tints, held in harmonious poise.

LXXX.

The seasons came and went. In sun or frost
Twinkled the olive, shook the aspen bough:
In winter whiteness shone Legnone's brow,
Or cooled his fiery rocks in skyey blue
When o'er the ruffled lake the *brevæ* tossed
The struggling barks: their cups of snow and dew
The dark magnolias held, and purpling poured
The trampled blood from many a vineyard's hoard.

LXXXI.

Five years had passed, and now the time was nigh
When on the fond result my hand must stake
Its cunning, — when the slowly-tutored eye
Must lend the heart its discipline, to make
Secure the throbbing hope, to which, elate,
My long ambition clung: and, with a sigh,
“If foiled,” I said, “let silence consecrate
My noteless name, and hide my ruined fate!”

LXXXII.

It was an autumn morn, when I addressed
Myself unto the work. A violet haze
Subdued the ardor of the golden days :
A glassy solitude was Como's breast :
Far, far away, from out the fading maze
Of mountains, blew the flickering sound of bells :
The earth lay hushed as in a Sabbath rest,
And from the air came voiceless, sweet farewells !

LXXXIII.

My choicest colors, on the palette spread,
Provoked the appetite : the canvas clear
Wooed from the easel : o'er his noble head
The faint light fell : his perfect body shed
A sunny whiteness on the atmosphere, —
All aspects gladsomely invited : yet
Across my heart there swept a wave of dread, —
The first lines trembled which my crayon set.

LXXXIV.

The background, lightly sketched, revealed a wild
Storm-shadowed sweep of Ammon's desert hills,
Whose naked porphyry no dew-fed rills
Touched with descending green, but rent and piled
As thunder-split : behind them, glimmering low,
The falling sky disclosed a lurid bar :
In front, a rocky platform, where, a star
Of lonely life, I meant his form should glow.

LXXXV.

The God-selected child, there should he stand,
Alone and rapt, as from the world, withdrawn
To seek, amid the desolated land,
His Father's counsel : in one tender hand
A cross of reed, to lightly rest upon,
The other hand a scrolled phylactery
Should, hanging, hold, — as it the seed might be
Wherefrom the living Gospel shall expand.

LXXXVI.

A simple theme : why, therefore, should my faith
In mine own skill forsake me ? why should seem
His beauteous presence strangely like a dream, —
His shining form an unsubstantial wraith ?
Was it the mother's warning, thus impressed
To stay my hand, or, working in my breast,
That dim, dread Power, that monitor supreme,
Whose mystic ways and works no Scripture saith ?

LXXXVII.

I dropped the brush, and, to assure my heart,
Now vanquished quite, with quick, impassioned start
Caught up the boy, and kissed him o'er and o'er, —
Cheek, bosom, limbs, — and felt his pulses beat
Secure existence, till my dread, dispelled,
Became a thing to smile at : then, once more
My hand regained its craft, and followed fleet
The living lines my filmless eyes beheld.

LXXXVIII.

And won those lines, and tracked the subtle play
Where cold, keen light, without a boundary,
Through warmth, lapsed into shadow's mystic gray,
And other light within that shadow lay,
A maze of beauty, — till, outwearied, he
With drooping eyelid stood and tottering knee;
While I, withdrawn to gaze, with eager lip
Murmured my joy in mine own workmanship.

LXXXIX.

I clothed his limbs again, and led him out
To welcome sunshine and his glad reward,
A scarlet belt, a tiny, gilded sword, —
And long our bark, the sleeping shores about
Sped as we willed, that happy afternoon:
And sweet the evening promise (ah! too soon
It came,) of what the morrow should afford, —
An equal service and an equal boon!

XC.

But on the pier a messenger I found
From Milan, where the borrowed name I bore
Was known, he said, and more than half-renowned;
And now a bright occasion offered me
A fairer crown than yet my forehead wore, —
A range of palace-chambers to adorn
With sportive frescoes, nymphs of Earth and Sea,
Pursuing Hours, and marches of the Morn!

XCI.

They might be mine, he urged, unless I shrank,
Too proud or timid to assert my claim.
Men called me shy; but here neglect were shame, —
Shame to repel, not take, a nobler rank.
So, half in sadness, half in hope, I gave
The word he sought, and followed whence he came;
And my St. John, upon the fading bank,
Answered my farewell signal from the wave.

XCII.

It steads not now that journey to repeat,
Which flattered, toyed, but nothing sure bestowed.
When four unrestful days were sped, my feet,
With yearning shod, retraced the homeward road,
With each glad minute nearing our retreat, —
Mine eyes, when far away Bellagio showed
Beyond Tremezzo, straining to explore
Some speck of welcome on the distant shore.

XCIII.

Then came the town, the vineyards and the hill,
The cottage: soft the orange sunset shone
Upon its walls, — but everything was still,
So still and strange, my heart might well disown
The startled sense that gazed: the door ajar, —
The chambers vacant, — ashes on the stone
Where lit his torch my shy, protecting Lar, —
Dark, empty, lifeless all: I stood alone!

XCIV.

As one who in an ancient forest walks
In awful midnight, when the moon is dim,
And knows not What behind, or near him, stalks,
And fears the rustling leaf, the snapping limb,
And cannot cry, and scarce can breathe, so great
The nameless Terror, — thus I sought for him,
Yet feared to find him, lest the darkest fate
Should touch my life and leave it desolate !

XCV.

The search was vain : they both had disappeared,
My boy and Agatha, nor missed I aught
Of food, or gold, or pictures. Had she sought,
The nurse, a livelier home, and loved or feared
Too much, to leave him ? Or some enemy,
Fell and implacable, this ruin brought, —
This thunder-stroke ? No answer could I see,
Nor prop whereon to rest my anguished thought.

XCVI.

Vain, too, were all my questions : none could say
When, how, or whither flew my bird away :
No boat received, no peasant's cart conveyed
The fugitives ; nor had a cry been heard
From the near vineyard or the olive shade, —
Yet they had gone and left the air unstirred
With any echo, and the earth unpressed
With any track to guide me in my quest !

XCVII.

As casts away a drowning man his gold,
I cast the Artist from my life, and forth,
A Father only, wandered : south or north
I knew not, save the heart within me hold
Love's faithful needle, ever towards him drawn,
Felt and obeyed without the conscious will :
And first, by nestling town and purple hill,
To Garda's lake I swiftly hastened on.

XCVIII.

And thence a new, mysterious impulse led
My steps along the Adige, day by day,
To seek that village where we saw the dead, —
A fantasy wherein some madness lay;
For years had passed, and he a babe so young
That each impression with its object fled:
Not so with mine, — my roused forebodings flung
That scene to light, and there insanely clung.

XCIX.

I found the village, but its people knew
No tidings: wearily awhile I trod
Among black crosses in the churchyard sod,
But who could guess the boy's? and why pursue
A sickly fancy? In that peopled vale
Death is not rare, alas! nor burials few,
And soon the grassy coverlet of God
Spreads equal green above their ashes pale.

C.

'T was eve : upon a lonely mound I sank
That held no more its votive immortelles,
And, over-worn and half-despairing, drank
The vesper pity of the distant bells,
Till sleep or trance descended, and my brain
Forgot its echoes of eternal knells,
Effaced its ceaseless images of pain,
And, blank and helpless, knew repose again.

CI.

I dreamed, — or was it dream? My Angelo
Called somewhere out of distant space : I heard,
Like faint but clearest music, every word.
“Come, father, come !” he said : “it shines like snow,
My house of marble : I’ve a speaking bird :
A thousand roses in my garden grow :
My fountains fall in basins dark as wine :
Come to me, father, — all is yours and mine !”

CII.

And then, one fleeting moment, blew aside
The hovering mist of Sleep, and I could trace
The phantom beauty of his joyous face ;
And, whitely glimmering, o'er him I espied
A marble porch of stern Palladian grace, —
Then faded all. The rest my heart supplied :
Pandolfo's palace on my vision broke :
“I come !” I cried ; and with the cry awoke.

THE
PICTURE OF ST. JOHN.



BOOK IV.

BOOK IV.



THE PICTURE.

I.

AS when a traveller, whose journey lies
In some still valley, slowly wanders on
By brook and meadow, cottage, bower, and lawn, —
Familiar sights, that charm his level eyes
For many a league, until, with late surprise
He starts to find those gentle regions gone,
And through the narrowing dell, whose crags enclose
His path, irresolutely, sadly goes :

II.

For what may wait beyond, he cannot guess,
A garden or a desert, — in such wise
I went, in ignorance that mocked the guise
Of hope, and filled me with obscure distress.
Locked in a pass of doubt, whose cliffs concealed
The coming life, the temper of the skies,
I craved the certain day, that soon should rise
Upon a fortunate or fatal field !

III.

The House of Life hath many chambers. He
Who deems his mansion built, a dreamer vain,
A tottering shell inhabits, and shall see
The ruthless years hurl down his masonry ;
While they who plan but as they slowly gain,
Where that which was gives that which is to be
Its form and symbols, build the house divine, —
In life a temple, and in death a shrine !

IV.

Too fast had mine ambition built : too sure
The structure stood upon its treacherous base.
One blast had levelled what I thought secure,
Nor could the gathered fragments e'er replace
The first fair edifice. My peaceful Past
Was closed and sealed : and forth my life was cast
To breast the heady tides, the shocks endure
Of jostling aims, yet hold its fortune fast.

V.

And following as the guiding vision led,
With briefest rest, with never-faltering feet,
By highways white, through field or chattering street
Or windy gorges of the hills I sped,
And crossed the level floors of silk and wine,
The slow canals, and, shrunken in their bed,
The sandy rivers, till the welcome line
Before me rose of Tuscan Apennine.



VI.

The southern slopes, with shout and festal song,
Rejoiced in vintage : as I wandered by,
Came faun-like figures, purple to the thigh
From foaming vats, and laughing women, strong
To bear their Bacchic loads : then, towards the town
Through blended toil and revel hastening down,
I saw the terrace — saw, and checked a cry, —
Whence Clelia flung to me the jasmine crown !

VII.

Alas ! how changed from him that wreath who wore, —
The youth all rapture, hope and sense uncloyed,
New-landed on the world's illumined shore, —
Walked now the man ! My downward path before
There sprang no arch of triumph from the void :
No censers burned : not as a conqueror
I entered Florence, — no ! a slave, that fed
On one last fragment of the feast I spread.

VIII.

There stretched the garden-wall : the yellow sun
Above it burnished every cypress spire,
Tipped the tall laurel-clumps with points of fire,
And smote the palace-marbles till they won
The golden gleam of ages. Yet, above
That mellow splendor stood the beauty flown
Of midnights, when around it blew and shone
The breeze of Passion and the moon of Love!

IX.

At last — the door ! With trembling touch I tried
The latch : it shook : the rusty bolts gave way.
As in a dream the roses I espied,
Heard as in dreams the fountain's lulling play.
There curled the dolphins in the shining shower
And rode the Triton boys : on either side
The turf was diapered with many a flower, —
And darkling drooped our green betrothal bower.

X.

Scarce had I entered, when there came a sound
Of voices from the pillared portico, —
And twofold burst a cry, as Angelo,
Across the paths, with wildly-joyous bound
Sprang to my bosom: while, as one astound
With sense of some unexpiated wrong,
The nurse entreated: “Bid thy father go!”
But “Stay!” he cried: “where hast thou been so long?”

XI.

“Stay, father! thou shalt paint me as thou wilt,
Each morning, in the silent northern hall;
But when, so tired, thou seest mine eyelids fall,
Then shall I take my sword with golden hilt,
And call the grooms, and bid them saddle straight
For us the two white horses in the stall —”
Here shrieked the nurse, with face of evil fate,
“Go, Signor, go! — ah, God! too late, — too late!”

XII.

His haste dividing, him to clasp I knelt
’Twixt porch and fountain, blind with tearful joy
As on my breast his beating heart I felt,
And on my mouth the kisses of the boy,
Wherein his mother’s phantom kisses poured
A stream of ancient rapture, love restored, —
When, like the lightning ere the stroke is dealt,
Before me flashed the old Marchese’s sword!

XIII.

So haggard, sunken-eyed, convulsed with wrath
That paints a devil on the face of age,
He glared, that, quick to shield my child from scath, —
To fly the menace of unreasoning rage, —
I caught him in my cloak, and dashed apart
The tangled roses of the garden-path :
Pandolfo — hate such fatal swiftness hath —
Leapt in advance, and thrust to pierce my heart!

XIV.

I saw the flame-like sparkle of the blade :
Heard, sharp and shrill, the nurse's fearful cry :
Warm blood gushed o'er my hands : a fluttering sigh
Came from the childish lips, that feebly made
These words, as prompted by the darkening eye,
" Good night, my father ! " And I knew not why
My boy should sleep, so suddenly and so well, —
But trembling seized me : clasping him, I fell.

XV.

Nor loosed my hold, although I dimly knew
Pandolfo's hand let fall the blade accurst,
And he, his race's hoary murderer, burst
The awful stillness that around us grew,
With miserable groans : his prostrate head
Touched mine, as helpless, o'er the fading dead, —
His hands met mine, and both as gently nursed
The limbs, and strove to stay the warmth that fled.

XVI.

His Past, my Future, in the body met, —
His wrongs, my hopes, — the selfsame fatal blow
Dashed into darkness : blood Lethéan wet
My blighted summer, his autumnal snow,
And all of Life did either life forget,
Except the piteous death between us : so,
Together pressed, involved in half-embrace,
We hung above the cold, angelic face.

XVII.

“ Her father, why should Heaven direct thy hand
Against her child, thy blood, chastising thee ? ”
“ I loved the boy — ” “ But couldst not pardon me,
His father ? ” “ Nay, but thou thyself hadst banned
Beyond forgiveness ! ” “ Even at *his* demand ? ”
“ Ah, no ! for his sweet sake might all things be,
Except to lose him. ” “ He is lost, — and we
(Thou, too, old man !) are childless in the land ! ”

XVIII.

Thus brokenly, scarce knowing what we said,
We clung like drowning men beneath the wave,
That nor can hurt each other, nor can save,
But breast to breast with iron arms are wed
Till Death so leaves them. Us the servants led —
Pale, awe-struck helpers — through the palace-door
And glimmering halls, to lay on Clelia's bed
The broken lily we together bore.

XIX.

God's thunder-stroke his haughty heart had bowed :
It bled with mine among the common dust
Where Rank puts on the sackcloth of the crowd,
And sits in equal woe : his guilt avowed,
And mine, there came a sad, remorseful trust,
And while the double midnight gathered there
From sable hangings and the starless air,
We held each other's hands, and wept aloud.

XX.

And he confessed, how, after weary search
And many a vain device employed, he found
By chance in Zara, on Dalmatian ground,
As altar-piece within a votive church
Some shipwrecked Plutus built,—the Mother mild
In whose foreboding face my Clelia smiled;
And thence, by slow degrees, to Como's side
Had followed home the trail I thought to hide.

XXI.

And there had seized me, but the boy displayed
Patrician beauty, and the failing line,
Now trembling o'er extinction, might evade
Its fate in him. This changed the first design,
And what the sordid nurse for gold betrayed
Or those Art-hucksters chattered, easy made
The rape, whose issue should, with even blow,
Revenge and compensate: but now,—ah, woe!

XXII.

The issue had been reached : too dark and drear,
Too tragic, pitiful, and heart-forlorn,
Could any heart contain it, to be borne, —
And mine refused, rebelled. Behind his bier
No meek-eyed Resignation walked, or Grief
That catches sunshine in each falling tear
To build her pious rainbow : but with scorn
I thrust aside the truths that bring relief.

XXIII.

I spurned, though kindly, — for the old man's frame
Stumbled in Death's advancing twilight, — all
His offers : gold — the proud Pandolfan hall —
Place, that should goad the lagging feet of Fame —
And from his sombre palace, shuddering still,
Cold with remembered horror, took my name,
My own, restored ; and climbed the northern hill
As one who lives, though dead his living will.

XXIV.

Some habit, working in my passive feet,
Its guidance gave: the mornings came and went:
Around me spread the fields, or closed the street,
And often, Night's expanded firmament
Opened above the lesser dome of Day,
And wild, tumultuous tongues of darkness sent
To vex my path, — till, in our old retreat,
I ceased to hold my reckless heart at bay!



XXV.

I had not known how dear, how close-entwined
His lovely life: but now the knowledge brought
A sting to torture sick, dismembered thought,
And, reaching through the heart to taint the mind,
Infected all my being. Sorrow stirred
The springs of Evil, and my fancy sought
In aims reversed, perverted act and word,
The laws of this misgoverned life to find.

XXVI.

Some natures are there, fashioned ere their birth
For sun, and spring-time, and the bliss of earth;
Who only sing, achieve, and triumph, when
The Hours caress, and each bright circumstance
Leaps to its place, as in a starry dance,
To shape their story. These the fortunate men,
When Fate consents, whose lives are ever young,
And shine around whate'er they wrought or sung!



XXVII.

Akin to these am I, — or deemed it so,
And thus beyond my present wreck beheld
No far-off rescue. All my mind, impelled
By some blind wrath that would resent the blow,
Though impotent, caught action from despair,
And reached, and groped, — as when a man lets go
A jewel in the dark, and seeks it where
The furzes prick him and the brambles tear.

XXVIII.

The clash of inconsistent qualities
No labor stayed, or beauteous passion smoothed,
But each let loose, and grasping, by degrees,
Sole sway, made chaos. Turbulent, unsoothed
By either's rule,—since order failed therein,
And hope, the tidal star of restless seas,—
I turned from every height, once fair to win,
And sinned 'gainst Art the one unpardoned sin!

XXIX.

For thus I reasoned: what avail my gifts,
Which but attract, provoke the spoiling Fate?—
Nor for themselves their destinies create,
But task my life; and then the thunder rifts
Their laid foundations! Why of finer nerve
The members doomed to bear more cruel weight?
Or daintier senses, if they only serve
To double pangs, already doubly great?

XXX.

Lo ! yonder hind, on whom doth Life impose
So slight a burden, finds his path prepared ;
Unthinking fares as all his fathers fared,
And cheap-won joys and soon-subsiding woes
Nor cleave his heart too deep, nor lift too high.
Peaceful as dew-mist from an evening sky
The years descend, until they bid him close
Upon an easy world a quiet eye !

XXXI.

He sees the shell of Earth — no more : yet more
Were useless, — attributes of thankful toil ;
The olive orchards, dark with ripening oil ;
The misty grapes, the harvests, tawny-hoar ;
The glossy melons, swelling from the vine ;
The breezy lake, alive with darting spoil ;
And dances woo from yonder purple shore,
And yonder Alps but cool his summer wine !

XXXII.

He lives the common life of Earth : she grants
Result to instinct, food to appetite :
With no repressed desire his bosom pants,
Nor that self-torturing, questioning inward sight
Vexes his light, unconscious consciousness.
He loves, and multiplies his life, — no less
His virile pride and fatherly delight ;
And all that smites me, visits him to bless.

XXXIII.

If this the law, that narrower powers enjoy
Their use, denied the greater, — nay, are nursed
And helped, while these their energies destroy
In baffled aspirations, crossed and cursed
By what with brightening promise lured them on, —
Then life is false, its purposes reversed,
Its luck for those who leave its veils undrawn,
And Art the mocking glory of its dawn !

XXXIV.

What help, that oft a shining avenue
Opens behind the grave, and down through time,
Self-builed, bears a name that seems sublime?
That laurel shoots, where only nightshade grew?
Far happier he, whose breathing day is rife
With restful peace, — to whom existence brings
Joy in itself, and in the range of things,
And, leaf by leaf, unfolds the flower of Life!

XXXV.

Not calmly, as my memory now recalls
The crisis, — fierce, vehemently, I tracked
The fatal truth through every potent fact
Of being; now in fancied carnivals
Of sense abiding, now with gloomy face
Fronting the deeper question that appalls,
Of “Wherefore Life? and what this brawling race,
Peopling a mote of dust in endless space?”

XXXVI.

“O fools!” I cried, “O fools, a thousand-fold
Tormented with your folly, seeking good
Where Good is not, nor Evil! — words that hold
Your natures captive, making ye the food
And spoil of them that dare, with vision bold,
See Nothingness! — slaves of transmitted fear
Of Power imagined, never understood,
The Demon rules you still that set you here!

XXXVII.

“The masters they, who counterfeit your dreams
And play upon them, with a grand disdain
Past your detection: yet were knowledge vain
To ye, whose pathway touches no extremes,
And me, who will not stoop to seek its aid,
But in this solitary house of pain
Sit till I perish!” Thus a sharper blade
Cut to the quick, and smarted unallayed.

XXXVIII.

And as a voyager, whose birchen shell
Shoots down a flashing rapid, — failed his course,
And spun and whirled around a churning well
Of torn, wild waters, — foldeth up the force
Of helpless arms, and waiteth what may come ;
So waited I, in scornful indolence
That seemed awhile my misery to benumb,
But grew, ere long, another aching sense.

XXXIX.

The curse I would have broken bound me still.
As flowery chains aforetime, fetters now
Of tyrant Art subdued my wandering will,
And made its youthful, glad, spontaneous vow
An iron law, whence there was no escape.
No rest, though hopeless, would my brain allow,
But drew the pictures of its haunting ill,
And gave its reckless fancies hue and shape.

XL.

So, after many days, the cobwebbed door
Creaked open : naught was there displaced ;
And first I turned, with pangs and shuddering haste,
My young St. John, — I would not see it more.
Then snatched an empty canvas from the floor
And drew a devil : therein did I taste
Fierce joys of liberty, for what I would
I would, — Art was itself a Devilhood !

XLI.

This guilty joy, the holiest to debase, —
To use the cunning, born of pious toil,
Each purest aspiration to assoil,
And drag in ribaldry the pencil's grace, —
Grew by indulgence. Forms and groups unclean
Or mocking, faster than my hand could trace
Their vivid, branding features, thrust a screen
My restless woe and dead desire between.

XLII.

Sometimes, perchance, a grim, sarcastic freak
My pencil guided, and I stiffly drew
Byzantine saints, of flat, insipid cheek
And monstrous eye; or some Madonna meek,
With dwarfish mouth, like those of Cimabue;
Or martyr-figures, less of flesh than bone,
Lean hands, and lips forever making moan,—
A travesty of woe, distorted, weak.

XLIII.

Or, higher ranging, touched the field that charms
Monastic painters, who, in vision warm
The Mystery grasp, and wondrous frescoes form
Where God the Father, with wide-spreading arms,
Rides on the whirlwind which His breath has made,
Or sows His judgments, Earth in darkness laid
Beneath Him,—works which only not blaspheme,
Because the faith that wrought them was supreme.

XLIV.

Thus habit grew, imagination stalked
In shameless hardihood from things profane
To sacred : nothing hindered, awed, or balked
The appetite diseased, and such a plan
I sketched, as never since the world began —
So strange and mad — engendered any brain.
Once entertained, the lovely-loathsome guest
Clung to my fancy and my hand possessed.

XLV.

Not broad the canvas, but the shapes it showed,
With utmost art defined, might almost seem
To grow and spread, dilating with the theme.
Filling the space, a lurid ocean glowed
In endless billows, tipped with foam of fire,
Shoreless : but far more dreadful than a dream
Of Hell, the shapes which in that sea abode,
With sting and fang, and scaly coil and spire !

XLVI.

One with a lizard's sinuous motion slipped
Forth from the dun recesses of the wave,
Man-eyed and browed, but tusked and lipped
Like river-horse : its claws another drave
Within a ghastly head, whose dim eyes gave
Slow tears of blood ; and with a burning tongue
In brazen jaws out-thrust, another stripped
From floating bones the flesh that round them clung !

XLVII.

Far-off, upraised, appeared a crimson hand,
Clenched as in agony upon a snake
That stung it ever : midway o'er the lake
Drifted what seemed a half-extinguished brand,
But those dull sparks were eyes, that rounded black
A woman's bosom : flame-red vultures fanned
Their horny wings, and swam along her track
A nameless, bloated Thing, with warty back !

XLVIII.

And in the midst, suspended from above
Just o'er the blazing foam, in light intense,
A naked youth — a form of strength and love
And beauty, perfect as the artist's sense
Dreams of a god ; and every glorious limb
Burned in a glow that made those billows dim,
A weird and awful brilliance, coming whence
No eye might fathom, dashed alone on him !

XLIX.

Let down from Somewhere by a mighty chain
Linked round his middle, lightly, graciously
He swung, and all his body seemed to be
Compact of molten metal, such a stain
Of angry scarlet streamed and shot around :
The face convulsed, yet whether so with pain
Or awful joy, no gazers might agree,
And damp the crispy gold his brows that crowned.

L.

And, as he swung, all hybrid monsters near,
Dark dragon-leech, huge vermin human-faced,
Their green eyes turned on him with hideous leer,
Or stretched abhorrent tentacles, to taste
His falling ripeness. Through the picture spread
A sense of tumult, hinting to the ear
The snap and crackle of those waters red,
And hiss, and howl, and bestial noises dread.

LI.

Unweariedly I wrought, — each grim detail
As patient-perfect, as from Denner's brush,
Of hair, or mouldy hide, or pliant mail,
Or limbs, slow-parting, as the grinders crush
Their quivering fibres: good the workmanship,
Yet something unimagined seemed to fail, —
A crowning Horror, in whose iron grip
The heart should stifle, bloodless be the lip.

LII.

This to invent, with hot, unresting mind
I labored : early sat and late, possessed
With evil images, with wicked zest
To wreak my mood, though it might curse my kind,
On Evil's purest type, and horridest ;
And never young ambition heretofore
In noble service so itself outwore.
What thus we seek, or soon or late we find.

LIII.

One morn of winter, when unmelted frost,
Beneath a low-hung vault of moveless cloud,
Silvered the world, even while my head was bowed
In half-despair, my brain the Horror crossed,
Unheralded ; and never human will
Achieved such fearful triumph ! Never came
The form of that which language cannot name,
So armed the life of souls to crush and kill !

LIV.

And this be never unto men revealed,
To curse by mere existence ! Knowledge taints,
Drawn from such crypts, the whitest robes of saints :
Though faith be firm, and warrior-virtue steeled
Against assault, the Possible breaks in
Their borders, and the soul that cannot yield
Must needs receive the images it paints,
And shudder, sinless, in the air of Sin !

LV.

My blood runs chill, remembering now the laugh
Wherewith, enlightened, I the pencil seized, —
Half deadly-smitten, fascinated half,
Yet sworn to do the dreadful thing I pleased !
All things upheld my mood with evil guise :
The palette-colors, to my sense diseased,
Winked wickedly, like devils' slimy eyes,
And darkness closed me from the drooping skies !

LVI.

As when a harp-string in a silent room
At midnight snaps, with weird, melodious twang,
So suddenly, through inner, outer gloom
A sweet, sharp sound, vibrating slowly, rang
And sank to humming music; while a stream
Of gathering odor followed, as in dream
We braid the bliss of music and perfume, —
And pierced, I sat, with some divinest pang.

LVII.

And, as from sound and fragrance born, a glow
All rosy-golden, fair as Alpine snow
At sunset, grew, — mist-like at first, and dim,
But brightening, folding inwards, fold on fold,
Until my ravished vision could behold
Complete, each line of sunny-shining limb
And sainted head, soft-posed as I had drawn
My boy — my Angelo — my young St. John!

LVIII.

O beauteous ghost! O sacred loveliness!
Unworthy I to look upon thy face,
Unworthy thy transfigured form to trace,
That stood, expectant, waiting but to bless
By miracle, where I intended crime!
The folded scroll, the shadowy cross of reed
He bore, — St. John, but not of mortal seed:
So God beheld him, in that early time!

LIX.

Dew came to burning eyes: a heavenly rain,
A balmy deluge, bathed my arid heart,
And washed that hateful fabric of the brain
To rot, a ruin, in some Hell of Art.
A sweet, unquestioning, obedient mood
Made swift revulsion from the broken strain
Of my revolt; and still the Phantom wooed,
As bright, and wonderful, and mute, it stood.

LX.

Yet I, through all dissolving, trembling deeps
Of consciousness, his angel-errand knew.
The guilty picture fell, and forth I drew
My dim St. John from out the dusty heaps,
And cleansed it first, and kissed in reverence
The shadowy lips, — fresh colors took, and true,
And painted, while on each awakened sense
The awful beauty of the Phantom grew.

LXI.

And grew the joy, past all permitted joys
Of flesh or spirit, to originate
Immortal types, which no defect alloys,
But perfect in their godlike equipoise
Of Truth and Vision! Here we touch the state
Of gods themselves, and none shall coldly rate
What thus is born of Beauty's right to be,
And being, stamps its own eternity!

LXII.

All hoarded craft, all purposes and powers
Together worked: the scattered gleams of thought
As through a glass my heart together brought
To light my hand: the chariots of the Hours
For me were stayed: I knew not Earth nor Time,
But painted nimbly in a trance sublime,
And tint by tint my charmed pencil caught,
And line by line, the loveliness it sought.

LXIII.

Mine eyes were purged from film: I saw and fixed
The subtle secrets, not with old despair
But with undoubting faith my colors mixed,
And with unfaltering hand the breeze-blown hair,
The dark, unfathomed eyes, the lips of youth,
The dainty, fleeting grace that stands betwixt
The babe and child, in members pure and bare,
Portrayed, with joy that owned my pencil's truth.

LXIV.

And he, my heavenly model! how he shone,
Unwearied, silent, — drawn, a golden form,
Against the background of a sky of storm,
On Ammon's desert hills! The landscape lone
Through all its savage slopes and gorges smiled,
Him to enframe, the God-selected child,
And o'er the shadowy distance fell a gleam
That touched with promised peace its barren dream.

LXV.

At last, the saffron clearness of the west,
From under clouds, shot forth elegiac ray
That sang the burial of the wondrous day;
And sad, mysterious music in my breast,
As at the coming, now the close expressed.
Ah, God! I dared not watch him float away,
But, seized and shaken by the fading spell,
And covering up my face, exhausted fell.

LXVI.

There, when my beating heart no longer shook
The sense that listened, though that music died,
A solemn Presence lingered at my side ;
And drop by drop, as forms an infant brook
Within a woodland hollow, soft, unheard,
And out of nothing braids its slender tide,
The sense of speech the living silence stirred
And wordless sound became melodious word !

LXVII.

No individual voice, the accents breathed
Continuous message through a sense unknown ;
And whether he whose semblance Heaven bequeathed
To save me, in angelic wisdom grown —
The child his father's teacher — comforted ;
Or on my soul, its madness overthrown,
The Truth an inward revelation shed,
'T were vain to guess : I listened, and was led.

LXVIII.

“O weak of will!” (so spake what seemed a voice)
“And slave of sense, that, hovering in extremes,
Dost over-soar, and undermine thy dreams,
Behold the lowest, highest! Make thy choice, —
Lord of the vile or servant of the pure :
Be free, range all that is, if better seems
Freedom to smite thyself, than to endure
The pain that worketh thine immortal cure !

LXIX.

“Lo! never any living brain knew peace,
That saw not, rooted in the scheme of things,
Assailing and protecting Evil! Cease
To beat this steadfast law with bleeding wings,
For know, that never any living brain,
Which rested not within its ordered plane,
Restrung the harp of life with sweeter strings,
Or made new melodies, except of pain !

LXX.

“Where wast thou, when the world’s foundations first
Were laid? Didst thou the azure tent unfold?
Or bid the young May-morning’s car of gold
Herald the seasons? Wouldst thou see reversed
The sacred order? Why, if life be cursed,
Add to its curses thy rebellion bold?
Or has thy finer wisdom only yearned
For thankless gifts and recompense unearned?”

LXXI.

“Come, thou hast questioned God: I question thee.
And truly thou art smitten,—yet repress
Thine old impatience: calm the eyes that see
How blows give strength, and sharpest sorrows bless.
Free art thou: is thy liberty so fair
To hide the ghost of vanished happiness,
And sleep’st thou sweeter under skies, so bare
These thunder-strokes were welcome to its air?”

LXXII.

“Why is thy life so sorely smitten? Wait,
And thou shalt learn! Dead stones thy teachers were:
Through years of toil thy hand did minister
To joyous Art: thou wast content with Fate.
Take now thy ruined passion, fix its date,
Peruse its growth, and, if thou canst, replan
The blended facts of Life that made thee man;—
Could aught be spared, or changed for other state?

LXXIII.

“Not less thy breathing bliss than yonder hind
Thou enviest, but more: therein it lies,
That each experience brings a twin surprise,
As mirrored in the glad, creative mind,
And in the beating heart. Behold! he bows
To adverse circumstance, to change and death;
But thou wouldst place thy fortune his beneath,
Shaming the double glory on thy brows!

LXXIV.

“His pangs outworn, perchance some feeling lives
For those of others: thine the lordly power
Transmuting all that loss or suffering gives
To Beauty! Even thy most despairing hour
Some darker grace informs, and like a bee
Thine Art sits hoarding in thy Passion’s flower:
So vast thy need, no phase thine eye can see
Of Earth or Life, that not enriches thee!

LXXV.

“Such is the Artist,—drawing precious use
From every fate, and so by laws divine
Encompassed, that in glad obedience shine
His works the fairer: his the flag of truce
Between the warring worlds of soul and sense:
By neither mastered, holding both apart,
Or blending in a newer excellence,
He weds the haughty brain and yearning heart.

LXXVI.

“ Beneath tempestuous, shifting movement laid,
The base of steadfast Order he beholds,
And from the central vortex, unafraid,
Marks how all action evermore unfolds
Forth from a point of absolute repose,
Which hints of God; and how, in gleams betrayed,
The Perfect even in imperfection shows, —
And Earth a bud, but breathing of the rose!

LXXVII.

“ Whose feet are firm, although his heart be tost;
Who holds his agony with steady hand
Till it be dumb, and dares his work remand,
Not weakly sacrifice, is never lost.
The Master he, whom Destiny obeys,
Though seeming first to thwart the thing he planned;
And, whether men forget, condemn, or praise,
He owns the world and lives immortal days!”

LXXVIII.

Even as the last stroke of a Sabbath bell,
Heard in the Sabbath silence of a dell,
Sounds on and on, with fainter, thinner note,
Distincter ever, till its dying swell
Draws after it the listener's ear, to float
Farther and farther into skies remote,—
So, when what seemed a voice had ceased, the strain
Drew after it the waiting, listening brain.

LXXIX.

And, following far, my senses on the track
Slid into darkness. Dead to life, I lay
Plunged in oblivious slumber, still and black,
All through the night and deep into the day:
Yet was it sleep, not trance,—restoring Sleep,
That from the restless soul its house of clay
Protects; and when I woke, her dew so deep
Had drenched, the wondrous Past was washed away.

LXXX.

But there, before me, its recorded gift
Flashed from the easel, so divinely bright
It shamed the morning: then, returning swift,
The wave of Memory rolled, and pure delight
Filled mine awakening spirit, and I wept
With contrite heart, redeemed, enfranchised quite:
My sick revolt was healed,—the Demon slept,
And God was good, and Earth her promise kept.

LXXXI.

I wandered forth; and lo! the halcyon world
Of sleeping wave, and velvet-folded hill,
And stainless air and sunshine, lay so still!
No mote of vapor on the mountains curled;
But lucid, gem-like, blissful, as if sin
Or more than gentlest grief had never been,
Each lovely thing, of tint that shone impearled,
As dwelt some dim beatitude therein!

LXXXII.

There, as I stood, the contadini came
With anxious, kindly faces, seeking me;
And caught my hands, and called me by my name,
As one from danger snatched might welcomed be.
Such had they feared, their gentle greeting told, —
Seeing the cottage shut, the chimney free
Of that blue household breath, whose rings, unrolled,
The sign of home, the life of landscape, hold.

LXXXIII.

So God's benignant hand directing wrought,
And Man and Nature took me back to life.
My cry was hushed: the forms of child and wife
Smiled from a solemn, moonlit land of thought,
A realm of peaceful sadness. Sad, yet strong,
My soul stood up, threw off its robes of strife,
And quired anew the world-old human song, —
Accepting patience and forgetting wrong!

LXXXIV.

Erelong, my living joy in Art returned,
But reverently felt, and purified
By recognition of the bounty spurned,
And meek acceptance in the place of pride.
Yet nevermore should brush of mine be drawn
O'er the unfinished picture of St. John :
What from the lovely miracle I learned,
The lines of colder toil should never hide.

LXXXV.

Though incomplete, it gave the prophecy
Of far-off power, whereto my patient mind
Must set its purpose, — saying unto me :
“ Make sure the gift, the fleeting fortune bind, —
What once a moment was, may ever be ! ”
And when, in time, this hope securer grew,
Unto the picture, whence my truth I drew,
A sacred dedication I assigned.

LXXXVI.

Pandolfo dead, the body of my child
Upon his mother's lonely breast I laid,
A late return; and o'er their ashes made
A chapel, in the green Bohemian wild,
For weary toil, pure thought, and silent prayer, —
A simple shrine, of all adornment bare,
Save o'er the altar, where, completed now,
St. John looks down, with Heaven upon his brow!

LXXXVII.

The Past accepts no sacrifice : its gates
Alike atonement and revenge out-bar.
We take its color, yet our spirits are
Thrust forward by a power which antedates
Their own : the hand of Art outreaches Fate's,
And lifts the bright, unrisen, refracted star
Above our dark horizon, showing thus
A future to the faith that fades in us.

LXXXVIII.

Not with that vanity of shallow minds
Which apes the speech, and shames the noble truth
Of them whose pride is knowledge, — nor of Youth
The dazzling, dear mirage, that never finds
Itself o’ertaken, — but with trust in fame,
As knowing fame, and owning now the pure
And humble will which makes achievement sure,
I, Egon, here the Artist’s title claim !

LXXXIX.

The forms of Earth, the masks of Life, I see,
Yet see wherein they fail : with eager eyes
I hunt the wandering gleams of harmony,
The rarer apparitions which surprise
With hints of Beauty, fixing these alone
In wedded grace of form and tint and tone,
That so the thing, transfigured, shall arise
Beyond itself, and truly live in me.

XC.

And I shall paint, discerning where the line
Wavers between the Human and Divine, —
Nor to the Real in servile bondage bound,
Nor scorning it: nor with supernal themes
Feeding the moods of o'er-aspiring dreams,
(For mortal triumph is a god uncrowned,) —
But by Proportion ruled, and by Repose,
And by the Soul supreme whence they arose.

XCI.

Not clamoring for over-human bliss,
Yet now no more unhappy, — not elate
As one exalted o'er the level state
Of these ungifted lives, yet strong in this,
That I the sharpest stab and sweetest kiss
Have tasted, suffered, — I can stand and wait,
Serene in knowledge, in obedience free,
The only master of my destiny!

XCII.

And thus as in a clear, revealing noon
I live. So comes, sometimes, a mountain day :
A vague, uncertain, misty morn, and soon
Sharp-smiting sun, and winds' and lightning's play, —
A drear confusion, by the final crash
Dispersed, and ere meridian blown away ;
And all the peaks shine bare, the waters flash,
And Earth lies open to the golden ray !

XCIII.

Lonely, perchance, but as these dark-browed hills
Are lonely, belted round with broader spheres
Of bluer world, my life its hope of peace fulfils
In poise of soul : the long, laborious years
Await me : closed my holy task, I go
To reaccept, beyond the Alpine snow,
The gage of glorious battle with my peers, —
Not each of each, but of false art, the foe.

XCIV.

Once more, O lovely, piteous, shaping Past,
I kiss thy lips: now let thy face be hid,
And this green turf above thy coffin-lid
Be turned to violets! The forests cast
Their shadowy arms across the quiet vale,
And all sweet sounds the coming rest foretell,
And earth takes glory as the sky grows pale,
So fond and beautiful the Day's farewell!

XCV.

Farewell, then, thou embosomed isle of peace
In restless waters! Let the years increase
With unexpected blessing: thou shalt lie
As in her crystal shell the maiden lay,
Watched o'er by weeping dwarfs, — too fair to die,
Yet charmed from life: and there may come a day
Which crowns Desire with gift, and Art with truth,
And Love with bliss, and Life with wiser youth!







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